University of Alberta

HOWARD BARKER'S
THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE

By

ANDREW HOUSTON

©

MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

Edmonton, Alberta

SPRING 1993

National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-315-82223-6

Canada

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RELEASE FORM

NAME OF AUTHOR: Andrew Houston

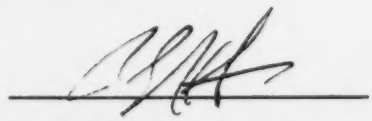
TITLE OF THESIS: Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe

DEGREE: Master of Arts

YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED: 1993

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly or scientific resreach purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and excpet as herinbefore provided neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatever without the author's prior written permission.



R.R. #3
Creemore, Ontario
CANADA
L0M 1G0

January , 1993

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled HOWARD BARKER'S THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE submitted by ANDREW HOUSTON in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in DRAMA.

James V. DeFelice

John A. Hawkins

M. Dale Wilkie

15 December 1992

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
An Introduction to Howard Barker:
Stages in Opposition.....page 1

CHAPTER TWO
The Possibilities in the Theatre of Catastrophe.....47

CHAPTER THREE
A Framework for Postmodern Analysis of
The Last Supper.....105

CHAPTER FOUR
The Last Supper: An Individual's Measure of Morality in
the Theatre of Catastrophe.....147

CHAPTER FIVE
The Theatre of Catastrophe in Context:
A Paradigm for Postmodern Drama.....196

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....230

APPENDIX ONE
Interview with Alan Edwards, Director of
ThePossibilities.....233

APPENDIX TWO
Interview with Will Zaichkowski, Director of
ThePossibilities.....240

APPENDIX THREE
Director's Notes on Performances of
The Last Supper, by Andrew Houston.....248

THESIS ABSTRACT

"Howard Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe" analyzes the dramaturgical development of audience reception strategies in two of Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe plays. The analysis explores the way in which content in Barker's plays becomes form in experiential terms for the audience. Therefore, the tension between the audience and the play creates an aesthetic. As this tension arises out of the dissolution of coherent meaning and an openness for each audience member to decide about what s/he has seen, this aesthetic is postmodern.

The thesis identifies, describes and analyzes the development of Barker's postmodern aesthetic through his playwriting career. Beginning with approaches taken to find a dramatic form intrinsic to his oppositional content, the analysis focuses upon dramaturgical approaches by which this aesthetic may be achieved, moving from the written text to performance. Utilizing the texts of The Possibilities and The Last Supper, theories of audience reception are explored.

The thesis is composed of five chapters and three appendices. Chapter One, outlines the development of the Theatre of Catastrophe aesthetic, detailing Barker's stylistic growth as a playwright of oppositional content. Chapter Two, examines The Possibilities as a seminal Theatre of Catastrophe play, wherein form establishes an openness and division in audience reception. Chapters Three and Four take audience reception analysis one step further in examining

The Last Supper, explicitly utilizing strategies of postmodern signification. In Chapter Five an analysis is made of the social framework within which the Theatre of Catastrophe is performed. Finally, the Appendices include interviews with directors of Barker's plays, presenting an important practical perspective of the Theatre of Catastrophe.

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO HOWARD BARKER: STAGES IN OPPOSITION

> In order to create theatre, it is necessary to leave it behind; and so the first thing to do is to find another place where the theatre can express itself.[1]

During the past two decades Howard Barker has developed his own form of theatre which he has termed Theatre of Catastrophe. It is the consummate expression of Barker's playwriting, wherein the form of a play also *becomes* content in experiential terms.[2] Since the mid-1970s, Barker has written plays with strong oppositional content. Initially, this was with the intention of showing 'real life', that which occurs but is not acknowledged by conventional media and thereby fulfils a political agenda. Gradually his frustration with forms and conventions of English society (and theatre) inspired exploration into more imaginative theatrical forms. Barker hoped to offer the possibility for practitioners and audience alike to investigate forms of expression which are not found in any other public forum, thus allowing for further

---

[1] Armand Gatti, "Armand Gatti on Time, Place, and the Theatrical Event," trans. Nancy Oakes, Modern Drama 25.1 (March): 71.

[2] David Ian Rabey, "Introduction," Arguments for a Theatre (London: Calder, 1989) 4.

exploration into the condition of humanity.

In his search for the perfect form to express his oppositional stance, Barker's playwriting style spans naturalism, satire, and the historical epic. Gradually he exhausted these and his form began to challenge conventional views of cultural archetypes, time and place. In his search for the Theatre of Catastrophe we see an exploration of theatrical form and experience which radically questions social phenomena. In his attempt to find a sharp opposition to socially accepted explanations of human conditions, Barker finds ways to bring his characters through the same searching process he himself has experienced.

Barker was born in London in 1946 and grew up in the south London suburb of Norwood. The son of a packer in a factory, Barker comes from a politically-conscious working-class background, and received much of his political 'education' at home. His father was an active trades unionist and a hard-line Stalinist. Barker claims he was brought up to be interested in politics; unlike many of his playwright-contemporaries he was not politicised by events in the sixties. Speaking of his upbringing, Barker says:

> I was aware at all times of the conflict between labour and the employers. My father worked in a very paternalistic family company where the men call the bosses Mr. Jack or Mr. Leslie, and they call the workers by their surnames, so I was very much aware of the basic relationship between the working class and the employer class. Although I didn't join the C.P.[Communist Party], I was much more aware that change had to come through industrial conflict rather than through

consciousness-changing.[3]

Class and conflict were essential to Barker's early plays. As a developing playwright, he felt conflict was the most powerful element in the theatre, and class conflict, the essential truth of English society. In addition, he was a product of the 1944 Education Act, and therefore part of the earliest generations of working class youth receiving a university education. Barker's class consciousness was further stripped bare by a liberal education, while at the same time giving him a more analytical reading of the situation. His earliest plays are about class warfare, but within the politics there is evidence of Barker's urge to 'get inside the head' of a working-class consciousness. Commenting on Barker's generation of educated working-class playwrights, Steve Grant in Plays and Players says

> they were dislocated and confused, radical but not angry, aware of the failure of the political system but unsure about the alternatives...Members of a sub-class [educated working-class] they represented an anomaly within the traditional British class structure.[4]

Barker plays have always demonstrated a questioning of political structures. Beyond this, however, as his method of analysis has developed, his portrayal of the complexities of the relationships between people within these structures has

---

[3] Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968 (London: Methuen, 1980) 250.

[4] Steve Grant, "Barker's bite," Plays and Players (November 1975): 36.

become more profound.

All of Barker's early work is set within a naturalistic, political context. As he states,

> I can't think how a serious writer could not place his characters in a political context; it's irresponsible if he's not continually brushing against politics, the quality of society and how individuals respond to it.[5]

By 1975, when Claw and Stripwell were his two most popular plays, classical aesthetic values -- style, language, character -- were visibly present alongside the politics. Having expressed many of his political arguments in the space of a few plays, Barker became increasingly interested in the aesthetic elements of writing. By the time he had written Claw, his instinctual approach was "not to write a political play in the sense that its didactic purpose is paramount, but to write a play in which politics happen to be the arena for the action."[6]

Produced at the Open Space theatre in 1975, Claw was a critical success, and was for some time considered Barker's best play. Exploring the personal motivations behind political acts, the relationship between public and private morality, and the dreams of a post-war working class youth, Claw represented a theatrical synthesis of the themes pursued in Barker's earlier work. Despite what most reviewers felt was a predictable, stereotypical portrayal of a Tory cabinet

---

[5] Itzin 251.

[6] Itzin 250.

minister, Claw made a solid and relatively successful attempt to explore the modern myth of a working-class youth bursting into the highest financial circles before expiring due to a lack of oxygen. Often a very funny play, Barker chose for his hero not an angry young man, but "a four-eyed runtish wimp,"[7] in the form of Noel Biledew, Welfare State product of hate and indifference, who becomes personal pimp to the government minister. Unfortunately for Biledew he goes too far and meets death in a mental asylum somewhere on the South Downs.

In the third act of the play we witness Biledew's execution, staged in such a way that it represents the beginning of Barker's attempt to create a dramatic form capable of more fully communicating his ideas. The third act brings about an amalgam of Barker's various writing styles up to that date: the comic, the moral, the satirical, and the emotional. The act opens in an asylum, a bare stage with an atmosphere vaguely like that of a torture chamber. Immediately we are thrust into an unknown environment, in contrast to the naturalistic, indeed, familiar and domestic settings thus far. The attempt is not merely stylistic, although it does annex a wider territory for theatre. Barker wants to show political pressure not in terms of closely-observed personal dilemmas, but to open up wide ranging vistas of English society. To get to the core of British political problems at historical roots, and "chuck overboard any concern with unities and pillage the

---

[7] Grant 36.

entire stock of forms and conventions."[8]

John Ford, reviewing Claw in Plays and Players describes the stylistic jolt which begins the third act, as well as the kind of purgatory Noel Biledew has found himself in before his death:

> Two waiters serve Claw [a.k.a. Noel Biledew] breakfast. They do not speak to him. They speak to the audience about themselves. They are both men of violence. One tells the story of the first time he planted a bomb in Northern Ireland. The second tells of his experience as an apprentice hangman before the abolition of the death penalty. Both speeches are written with an extraordinary clarity and sympathy. The men also gossip about the grubby sexual origins of pop stars, and it gradually becomes clear that they are not waiters but warders. This is a mental institution of a very special nature, and they have been selected to work there because of their particular experience. Claw appeals to his warders, but gets no response. He appeals to a vision of his father. Old Biledew, now dying, condemns Claw's individualism, regrets that he did not have the vocabulary necessary to pass on his experience, and advises Claw not to despise his class but to win them. Claw again appeals to his warders. They swiftly and efficiently drown him in a bath.[9]

David Edgar felt that it was "not easy to think of a series of images that say so much in so little time as those of the last half hour of Howard Barker's Claw."[10] Biledew's journey from rejecting the politics of his working-class upbringing, to becoming a pimp to the aristocracy was strikingly symbolic to

---

[8] Itzin 258.

[9] John Ford, "*Claw*...," Plays and Players (November 1975): 40.

[10] David Edgar, "Putting Politics on Stage," New Socialist (Nov./Dec. 1981): 56.

lives of many crossing the class barrier in contemporary England. His scandal involving the Secretary of State for Home Affairs, and subsequent arrest and murder by the Special Branch were imaginative extensions of a political struggle rooted in events like the introduction of internment without trial in Northern Ireland in 1971, the 1972 Miner's strike, and the rash of arrests of trade-unionists defying the autocracy of Edward Heath's Tory government. Edgar used Claw as an example of formal developments in political theatre in the seventies. He praises the play for its "upending of received forms and techniques of shock and disruption."[11] For him, "the play confront[s] the gap between the objective crisis of the system and the subjective responses of the human beings within it.[12] The beginnings of Barker's career mark an attempt, shared by his generation, to force a collision with the world of the West End and that of working class realism. With the stylistic development in Claw we witness a further attempt to send "blood racing through the veins of a sclerotic theatre"[13] by reinventing the form to adequately communicate a contemporary experience.

As Edgar observes, the theme of Claw is, at least in part, "the capacity of the middle-class to accommodate and

---

[11] Edgar 57.

[12] Edgar 57.

[13] Itzin 258.

destroy dissent."[14] Noel Biledew's last ditch attempt to redeem himself in the eyes of his captors concludes with the lines:

> We have nothing but each other. Our common nothingness. And our caring for each other. And our refusal to do each other down. Like a class of schoolboys we won't tell who is the thief. (*pause*) Defend me. Don't murder me.[15]

As critic Steve Grant observes, "these are hardly the sentiments of a rampant agit-propper,"[16] yet Barker felt his attack upon the middle-class was too stereotypical. With his next play he vowed to find a form which allowed for a more humanist critique of the middle-class. In Stripwell, Barker makes his protagonist middle-class, and thereby leaves himself more room for a complex critique of his character's demise. Through Graham Stripwell, we are offered an exploration into why the moral role of the middle-class is exhausted, as he explains:

> The middle-class had a kind of moral authority in the last century because it was the progressive class economically and socially. Now the torch has passed on I feel, and that element in the middle-classes which once gave them their authority has become parasitic.[17]

Barker wrote the central role for Michael Hordern, an actor

---

[14] Edgar 57.

[15] Howard Barker, Stripwell & Claw (London: Calder, 1977) 229.

[16] Grant 37.

[17] Grant 39.

celebrated for his humanist interpretations of characters. He was attempting also to reach a wider audience at the Royal Court's main stage. In an interview conducted by Tony Dunn in 1984, nine years after Stripwell had its successful run at the Royal Court, Barker recants the humanism in the play. In 1984 Barker had written a number of plays that were not being produced; in the interview Dunn and he explores some of reasons why. He refers back to Stripwell, ("which I planned coldly to be a commercially successful play for a particular management"[18]) as an experience of self-censorship and compromise.

> Some of the issues were the same as those I'd tackled before and since - moral decline, personal defeat - but the context was domestic and the situation firmly middle-class, so that it was easy to interpret as a play about the crisis of values in the bourgeois individual. As such, it got an extremely sympathetic performance from an actor justly celebrated for his humanity - Michael Hordern. Of course I couldn't go all the way - Stripwell is murdered at the end in a very violent, comic scene which probably ruined the whole enterprise because the secret of bourgeois domestic drama is its insistence on comfort, in the last analysis, the reiteration of the values you have just spent the evening agonizing over. Critics still refer back to this as my best work. For them it was a positive play because in the way that bad theatre flatters its patrons, it bestowed wit, tenderness and absolute good taste on the ruling-class. I never liked Stripwell, I preferred his murderer, though I have no fondness for criminality. So there was a play full of English humanism, with a very clear statement of my

---

[18] Tony Dunn, "Interview With Howard Barker," Gambit, 41 (London: Calder, 1984): 43.

reservations attached to the end.[19]

The humanism of the play's central character aside, Stripwell was a further exploration into crime and working-class culture dealt with in his earlier work. Stripwell is a judge, married to the daughter of a very elderly, very eminent 'old socialist' politician resonantly named Jarrow. Ironically, Stripwell has fathered a 'silver-spooned', free-enterprising, absolutely amoral son and keeps (or tries to keep up with) a mistress who is a go-go dancer with literary aspirations. At the beginning of the play, Stripwell passes judgement and sentence on a minor offender named Cargill who vows from the dock to take revenge. He says he is going to kill Stripwell. The threat prompts Stripwell to question his role and function in society -- and he decides to quit judging. The play is very much about dropping out and stripping away. In the play's characters, politics, education, work, money, marriage, sex, and class are all exposed. The 'stripping' metaphor is effectively woven throughout the play.

The play is very funny; most of the humour arises out of Barker's ability to create apparently 'respectable' characters, full of incongruities and contradictions. For example, the humanitarian judge slums with a stripper; his wife, of aristocratic origin, claims to be a socialist yet her fondest memory is having copulated twenty years earlier with a Tory M.P. on the floor of the House; not to mention a son,

---

[19] Dunn, "Interview With Howard Barker" 43.

whose socialist background brings him up to be a capitalist. Barker does not resolve any of these contradictions, except perhaps implicitly in the violent death of Stripwell in the end.

Ironically, some of the criticism of Stripwell called it an "'attacking' kind of play."[20] In response to criticism of the play in Tribune, Barker wrote:

> The contradictions form the vital backbone both of the play and the society it's trying to describe...Stripwell is a warm-hearted and rather winning character (i.e. he invites your sympathy)...The fact that he is pleasant as an individual does not weaken the fact that he exists in a world of contradiction and inherent decadence - he is unable to make a moral decision because of his class character.[21]

In addition to finding fault in the contradictory nature of Stripwell's character, critical response was even more vexed by the fact that Barker never resolves any of the contradictions by the end of the play. Cargill's decision at the end of the play to reject the compromise of Stripwell and kill him is akin, in Barker's mind, to the working-class rejection of this kind of castrating inaction, and invoke the necessary violence for revolutionary change. Concerning this particularly violent projection, Barker comments:

> I am deeply depressed about the only alternatives we seem to have before us - either to accept a perpetually treacherous social democratic Labour Party (which simply cannot deliver the goods), and to live that hypocrisy - or to destroy it. I am not

---

[20] Grant 39.

[21] Itzin 253.

certain which gives the greater pain.[22]

Stripwell is an analysis of the failure of the middle class ideal of compromise, and it demonstrates the full complexity of the issue. This troubled many critics who wanted a very black and white message in the play. Steve Grant suggests that what most critics miss in the play is that it is not a fierce attack on the ruling-class by a young, left-wing satirist, but a complex, sympathetic portrait of a 'point of view' for which the author has a less-than-grudging respect.[23] The play's experiments with humanism for commercial success turn out to be an influence which never leave Barker's work. A point which in itself makes one wonder about the validity of his retrospective remarks concerning treatment of the characters in the play, and whether or not the play was in fact aimed at 'a particular management'. In defence of Barker's assertions, the form of his plays after Stripwell do change in a number of significant ways. For instance, Barker begins to eschew realism, in his depictions of character, place, and time. No longer are his characters found in wholly contemporary settings without some stylization or metaphorical alteration. Barker's plays begin to escape the domestic confines which would limit the emotional and political depths explored. Finally, in the tradition of Michel

---

[22] Itzin 253.

[23] Grant 36.

Foucault,[24] his characters' relationship to historical time and place is altered and is no longer linear. Grappling to find a way to more fully explore human nature in his plays, the form of Barker's work becomes progressively more complex in an effort to challenge both himself and his audience to confront truth in human nature.

In his next two plays, That Good Between Us and Fair Slaughter, both produced in 1977, historical events are fictionally elaborated and thereby examined for their essence and resonance with current events. Barker attempts to get away from the more traditional practice of writing a history play whereby historical events are presented with condescension -- "the idea that somehow the state of society that we've achieved is more advanced, more sophisticated, and therefore that we are entitled to look back as if through a telescope at lesser beings."[25] In these two plays Barker presents historical events in such a way that we are aware of his presenting the past in a critical light; with a consciousness of how we view these events and how we see ourselves being shaped by them. Ultimately he achieves this end by juxtaposing historical and contemporary events and figures, while

---

[24] Later in the thesis I elaborate on the relationship between Barker's work and Foucault's theories.

[25] Finlay Donesky, "Oppression, Resistance, and the Writer's Testament," New Theatre Quarterly, 8 (Summer 1986): 338.

fictionally exploring both. For Barker, this stage of playwriting meant a considerable departure from the linear plot-line structure found in his previous work. With the abandonment of a linear plot-line and a specific historical place or perspective, his imagination was freed to explore the ramifications of individual actions over place and time, with a view to how we document these in history.

Fair Slaughter was produced by the Royal Court, on their main stage. Though it continues to follow some of the ideas set forth in Barker's earlier work, for example, the relationship of crime to the working class, it explores a history of hope and anguish often a part of socialism in England. In this respect, Barker has said it is a play about "the tragedy of being English."[26] The play cleverly intersperses scenes from the end of the life of an old, failed revolutionary named Gocher with scenes from his past life, chronicling his development from youth onwards. At the top of the play he is in the hospital of Wandsworth prison, having committed the politically motivated murder in a public hospital. In an episodic presentation of scenes, complete with Brechtian titles indicating place and time, we see Gocher's quest for a socialist society that spans two world wars and then finally comes to a close with the collapse of the welfare state (Britain circa 1977), and Gocher on his deathbed. In the course of his lifetime, Gocher receives his Communist

---

[26] Itzin 254.

conversion as a young man while a private of His Majesty's army stationed in Siberia where he befriends Trotsky's train driver and takes the man's dismembered hand home to England as a souvenir and a symbol of his socialist aspirations. He carries the gruesome totem to his death bed. Gocher never quite succeeds as Lenin's self-appointed British vanguard, and in the end he decides to bury his dreams by returning the hand to its native soil. He does not quite get back to Siberia, but with the help of a prison guard whom he has persuaded to aid his efforts, he makes it to the South Downs for a 'fictional' return to the birthplace of his belief. Ultimately it is his integrity in the pursuit of a vision that we learn to appreciate.

In reference to Gocher, Barker says with admiration, "he has an aspiration to be historical, and there is an aspect of this kind of individual desire missing in English history."[27] Many of the critics thought the play was pessimistic; however, Barker defends the passing-on of the faith of socialism which occurs in the play as positive. On his deathbed, at the end of the play, Gocher has converted the young prison guard to his political way of thinking, he hands the guard this "talisman of socialism" (Barker's term for Trotsky's train driver's hand) who runs off with it -- like an Olympic torch. Barker says of this,

I believe in that. I believe that the working-class

---

[27] Itzin 254.

> learns its politics at the knee of its parents and in the factory. Each generation tells the next what working in the capitalistic system is like. So the handing on of the bottle in the play is symbolic and positive.[28]

There are moments in the play which seem to be written very much in the style of Brecht's *gestus*, or "the relationship between two people, cut to essentials and physically or verbally expressed."[29] This represented a definite branching-out in Barker's playwriting, experimenting as these moments do with the possibilities of a performer being able to convey the political, social, and economic truth of a situation. The following is a good example of Barker's *gestus*:

> YOUNG GOCHER. Home. Old England. The Brixton High Road, 1924. Waiting for the rising which must come. Says Lenin. Daily expectation in the Soviets. Meanwhile I am FUCKING STARVING! With my record no employer wants to look at me. Street corner layabout. Watching the traffic. Getting mesmerized. SNAP OUT OF IT! All right, but do what? Who am I? (*Pause.*) In capitalist society a man is what he owns. A man is what he stands up in. *(Pause. He looks at himself, opens his jacket, looks at a mouldering shirt underneath. His eyes travel to his shoes, the soles of which are flapping off. He walks a few paces, the soles flap noisily. He stops, takes off a shoe, looks at it. He is barefoot. He shakes the shoe. It flaps like a castanet. He removes the other shoe, and shakes them together. They make a primitive rhythm. He starts to shake a tune on the shoes, then stops, full of disgust. He looks at the bottle as if reproaching it.)* A man must eat! First, he has to eat! *(He hesitates, as if embarrassed by the*

---

[28] Itzin 254.

[29] Edward Braun, The Director and the Stage (London: Methuen, 1982) 174.

> *bottle, but then, overcoming it, he bends down and rolls up his trousers as far as they will go. Then he pulls his jacket up over his head, leaving it buttoned and the sleeves empty. Finally, with a grimace, he starts slapping the shoes together in a crude, tap-dancing manner, and performs a sand dance around the bottle. He stops in a paroxysm of humiliation. Then he continues. An occasional coin is flung on from the wings. Encouraged,* YOUNG GOCHER *performs with more polish. A few more pennies roll in. Taped laughter as from a theatre queue. He dances on until he is too tired to continue. He sits down wearily and begins collecting the money.)*[30]

At the beginning of the next scene we realize that Young Gocher has made his way to the professional stage of a music hall entertaining hundreds of working-class people each night, doing the same routine as above with the addition of a banjo and the following vocal:

> I am a no-bo-dy, No-bo-dy care for me,/ Ain't got a job, Ain't got no wife, no responsibility!/ I takes a stroll a-round,/ Like a real toff on the town,/ Sometimes I laughs, sometimes I cries,/ Sometimes I feel right down./ The copper says to me,/ The deckchairs are not free,/ Get off your bum, Move on now, son,/ You're a - (*pretending to stifle swear word*) Lia-bil-ity![31]

Young Gocher's routine receives 'a roar of applause' and the next scene is a dialogue between Young Gocher and his older self represented in the play by Old Gocher. Old Gocher comes to tell his younger self about how, in retrospect, he has realized that he and his audience were being exploited by the capitalists running the hall. Old Gocher explains that "every

---

[30] Howard Barker, Crimes in Hot Countries (also Fair Slaughter) (London: Calder, 1978) 75-6.

[31] Barker, Fair Slaughter 79.

voice lifted in song was one less calling for the revolution. Every hand clap was a clap for putting up with it. And putting up with it. And putting up with it."[32] Young Gocher rebukes Old Gocher and his advice saying that it must be "easy, when you've spent years in a bed!"; "giving advice from the clean streets", and finally, "there is no philosophy where there's no food."[33] Between the two versions of the same character we see the tremendous conflict within one man. Barker's innovative dramatic form offers a unique way of exploring the complexities of a nation's political, social, and economic questions as they affect the individual.

The question of an individual's survival is also taken up in That Good Between Us, which received its first production at (then the RSC's) Donmar Warehouse in July, 1977. That Good Between Us is loosely based on one historical event which had a variety of similarities to the political and social climate of England in the late seventies. The incident which caught Barker's attention was the 1820 Despard Army plot which he discovered while reading E.P. Thomson's The Making of The English Working Classes. The parallels identified by Barker were a similar problem in Northern Ireland; high unemployment, and the fear of unrest leading to a massive strike, revolt, or another French Revolution; finally this, in turn, leading to paranoia on the government part. The play was

---

[32] Barker, Fair Slaughter 79.

[33] Barker, Fair Slaughter 79.

a timely attack on the moderate Labour government of Harold Wilson, and all of the compromises on socialist policy for which they were famous. The resonances in the play are clear about a government working hand-in-glove with a civil service establishment, using a mixed economy which supports and perpetrates the status quo, or whoever is in power. The play is harshly critical of British parliamentary democracy, as Barker depicts political principle succumbing to expediency in the form of advantages with little regard of anything other than fulfilment of greed, and survival -- especially where status is concerned.

The play is a combination of these historical events, placed in a future setting: England under a Labour government rule and a society entirely undermined by a massive spy network. The play's protagonist, Billy McPhee, finds himself entrenched within this world of spies and corrupt government, and his survival is a key metaphor in the play. McPhee is modelled after the real Billy McPhee, a boy who came down from Scotland to London and ended up being murdered by a gang of thugs. Unlike the real person, reduced to a news story and an obituary, McPhee in the play is a true Barker hero. Faced with incredible adversity, he continues to act rather than suffer. McPhee has been described as a "Scottish Brendan Behan", and in fact he is the picture of the common man who is blackmailed into the spy game. Before he is politicised by the People's Democratic Movement, he's oblivious to whose pawn he is and

why, or, as a spy, who he is pawning and why. Barker portrays McPhee as a product of popular culture, and in this sense he is seen in a nihilistic light. That is, his ultimate survival in the world of the play is nothing to celebrate, as survival in this case is void of any change in the system or enlightenment within McPhee.

McPhee is the best example of Barker's critique on his own generation. In earlier plays like Stripwell, the younger characters are quite cynical. Tim, Stripwell's son, exhibits what Barker has called a disease of cynicism which comes from the kind of freedom his generation has enjoyed within England's welfare state. Also, Barker cites the massive increase in commercialism through the 1960s and 1970s as fuelling the decadence that has accompanied the cynicism. "We all thought the Rolling Stones would free us all in the 60s when, in fact, they were coming to power on the backs of poverty-stricken black songwriters."[34] With McPhee, we see a youth blinded to political realities by popular culture and therefore a victim to those willing to capitalize on his ignorance. A clear metaphor for the exploitation -- indeed, near destruction -- of McPhee occurs in the first scene of the play. The stage directions tell us the stage should appear like the sea, at night, somewhere off the Devon coast. "From some distance, a voice with a strong Glasgow accent singing

---

[34] Grant 39.

badly 'Everybody needs Somebody' by the Rolling Stones."[35] McPhee comes on stage, standing in a row boat being rowed by two overcoat-clad espionage agents, Bleach and Knatchbull. Throughout the scene McPhee keeps singing verses from a variety of Rolling Stones' songs; for example, "Have mer-cy, Have mer-cy, ba-by..."[36] And it becomes clear that the two agents have brought him out to sea to throw him overboard. The aspect of this scene that is so haunting, and makes it so resonant as a metaphor for England in the end of the 1970s is that McPhee appears to have agreed to go out in the boat with his assailants. McPhee is complicit in his own destruction. The boat's resemblance to the United Kingdom, with its English and Scottish occupants cannot be mistaken. While Bleach and Knatchbull nicely ask McPhee to remove his clothes all he can do is sing, "'This could be the last time...", and say, "Yoo'll go to hell, the pair of yoo!...What if I make it? I've done a mile. I've got the fuckin' certificate to prove it! What happens if I make it, eh?"[37] McPhee appears to have convinced himself that he is as super-human as his pop idols, and in his ignorance jumps in the water. As soon as he has, Bleach stands, picks up a oar, raises it above his head, and makes full swings at McPhee in an attempt to knock him

---

[35] Barker, That Good Between Us, Credentials of a Sympathiser (London: Calder, 1980) 3.

[36] Barker, That Good Between Us 3.

[37] Barker, That Good Between Us 5.

unconscious in the water. To this McPhee pathetically replies:

> Hey! Tha's nae fair! (BLEACH *brings the oar down with all his strength.*) Jesus Christ! Tha's nae fuckin' fair! (BLEACH *strikes again.*) Gi' us a chance! (*As* BLEACH *rains down blows,* KNATCHBULL *leans this way and that to maintain an even keel.*) Yoo Fuckin' cheat! (BLEACH *leans further out to strike.*) Oh, help me, Christ! Save me! (*The last blow lands.* BLEACH *regains his balance, then sits, wearily, head in hands.*)[38]

McPhee surprisingly makes it back to shore. By sheer willpower he is able to survive in a society that is totally corrupt. Though this may seem like a happy ending, in fact, Barker leaves us with a troubling question as to whether mere survival in our world is anything worth celebrating.

Many critics thought That Good Between Us was a nihilistic play. Barker felt it was not, but rather a speculative vision of a world in which morality had almost entirely disappeared; "in which human goodness as we understand it, has been eroded by the prevailing corruption of a truly decadent society."[39] All of the characters in the play exhibit no sense of moral responsibility, except for McPhee. McPhee has ideals, but is betrayed through his simplicity and honesty. This may seem pessimistic, but he is the only character who truly survives; his last words: "I! I! I!"[40] are an affirmation of his coming through the experiences of the play. The other characters are unmotivated

---

[38] Barker, That Good Between Us 6.

[39] Itzin 255.

[40] Barker, That Good Between Us 59.

products of a motiveless world. As Barker states:

> The play is a picture of a declining world and its disordered products... What both That Good Between Us and my other recent play Fair Slaughter show, I think, is that without political change, human nature deteriorates. And England is not changing.[41]

Barker's recognition of stagnation in the forms and conventions of British society was aided by his decision to liberate the action of his plays from domestic confines. As part of his departure from naturalistic-realism in the historical narratives running through his plays, Barker now begins to explore the location in which action takes place. Always a playwright with confrontational content, Barker describes this modification to dramatic form the following way:

> There is no need for theatre to be small, microscopic or domestic, let alone simple. The big things are the things it does best... The danger at the moment lies in the ever-present hunger for recognizable forms and domestic settings. I've created bleak environments and uncomfortable situations. The room can't any longer be the place where serious social collision occurs, in which social alienation is properly represented. On the contrary, the room is an area of reconciliation or individual crisis, unrelated to the outside. We are seeing serious threats to public life at the moment in the form of cable and video. The desire to restrict experience to the living room is a growing one.[42]

Part of the rationale behind such a perspective stems from Barker's impulse to make theatre a fuller, more encompassing

---

[41] Itzin 255-6.

[42] Dunn, "Interview With Howard Barker" 38.

experience than either television or film. Feeling that the camera is much more suited to naturalistic representation of life, Barker attempts to paint a larger canvas of life which is for him more suited to the theatre. With the Hang of the Gaol we see an attempt to create an environment capable of freeing the audience's imagination from the confines imposed by much mass media.

The setting for the Hang of the Gaol is that of the burnt-out shell of Middenhurst Gaol (jail); located in a wilderness of a moor susceptible to disorienting fog spells. Throughout the play there are plenty of references to the kind of Victorian monolith the prison was before it burned down. The jail, or what is left of it, is Barker's metaphor for the decay of English imperialism; run like a colony, it represents the kind of forms and conventions of Victorian ideals that he saw as still plaguing England on the eve of the 1980s. "A study of guilt and collusion,"[43] Barker calls it. Opening in 1978 as a Royal Shakespeare Company production, the play is about the arson of one of Her Majesty's prisons and the official investigation of the Labour government which "came, saw, and white-washed."[44] The action presents the decline of imperialistic England and the failures of the Labour government to initiate any alternative to the dying regime. Barker squares off the jail's Victorianly honourable governor,

---

[43] Itzin 256.

[44] Itzin 256.

against a deeply cynical Labour Home Secretary and a tragically weary 'socialist' Royal Commission. He comments:

> Prisons are very catholic descriptions of English society, they are very colonial. There is the governor, the staff of NCOs, the class of oppressed prisoners, and the way the prison operates is not unlike the way we used to run our colonies - a pyramid with a cultured, Christian apex. The governor wants to 'civilize' the inmates. I don't think that's possible. I don't believe in people making themselves better by willpower. It's a very Victorian notion of goodness. The play shows the contradictions of the liberal stance, the impossibility of personal morality in an immoral political system.[45]

Among the remains of this Victorian structure, Barker conjectures about the nature of freedom and responsibility for an individual in contemporary England.

Getting 'the hang' of an illusion of freedom, within the confines of an oppressive system of order is the meaning of the play's title. In one of the final scenes of the play this is aptly demonstrated. The scene opens out on an open moor. Apparently, the Home Secretary, Stagg, has invited Jardine, Head of the Royal Commission, on a hunting trip in order to try and talk him out of the commission's findings -- that the jail's governor is responsible for burning his own jail. Stagg tries to bribe Jardine with a promise of a knighthood, which Jardine has earned in any case for many years of civil service. Apparently the Labour Party has made cuts in this kind of spending and it appears Jardine's knighthood is in jeopardy. Jardine accuses Stagg of being

---

[45] Itzin 256.

unfair, to which Stagg responds:

> George, we happened to be lumbered here with what they call the party-system, the Westminster model, call it what you like. And the bulk of the population of this long-suffering island of ours are under the impression it is freedom. The thought of this freedom no doubt gives comfort to old ladies dying of neglect in tower-blocks. It is no doubt shouted from the terraces by fifteen year-old illiterates. But it is what we've got and we'ave got to work with it, bent and crippled as it is. Nothing is perfect, least of all corruption, but the smelly old women and schizophrenic kids don't give a bugger for your morals. We did not choose the system. but **we have got to get the hang of it.**[46]

In The Hang of the Gaol Barker begins to take his audience out onto an open-field of imagination, outside the domestic structures of contemporary England. From this outside perspective, the play looks inward at a society encumbered with nineteenth-century social and political ideologies. Barker begins to use the theatrical medium to practice a freedom of expression that, for him, has become a myth in England. He debunks the notion that freedom is about universal suffrage and the parliamentary system; "ballot-boxing,...abetted by the capitalist press."[47] Within the burnt-out jail we see a procession of characters from the ironically socialist members of the Royal Commission; their cynical Fire Inspectorate team, coldly quizzing each other and their technology about hypothetical fires and their

---

[46] Howard Barker, The Hang of the Gaol (London: Calder, 1982) 77.

[47] Itzin 257.

devastating toll on human life; the entire shame-ridden prison guard; the governor, his wife, and a prisoner/servant of theirs who has been protected and educated by the governor. This last character, Turk, starts a fire of his own in protest against his fellow inmate's oppression, and scoffs at the system's cover up:

> They have brought George Jardine in, to paste white paper on the sores. A dummy from the cabinet was seen flying by, muttering like the uncrowned king that something must be done. *(Pause.)* I took fire to their agonizing, mister, or I should have gone mad.[48]

In the character of Turk, Barker sums up the futility of the system. He is educated but incarcerated; thus he fully embodies the essence of the play: a yearning for absolute truth with a tragic sense of its impossibility. In his next two plays, Barker continues to expand upon this conundrum, as seen through the eyes of an artist.

No End of Blame, subtitled, Scenes of Overcoming was first performed by the Oxford Playhouse Company at the Oxford Playhouse in February of 1981. The play chronicles the struggle of an admired but dissatisfied artist, Bela Veracek, whose work is too visionary to please his employers but who knows that to earn the fear of the state is a measure of his power. As he states, "I stirred the police, therefore I touched the truth."[49] Bela discovers that no artist is ever

---

[48] Barker, The Hang of the Gaol 55.

[49] Howard Barker, No End of Blame (London: Calder, 1981)

free of constraint, be it from censoring authorities, a committee of his colleagues, or the demand of his audience. In essence, he discovers the contradictions inherent in artistic freedom.

Like Claw the play begins in an open space (The Carpathian Mountains) and ends in patrolled enclosure (the grounds of a mental institution).[50] This journey is made by Bela Veracek, and another Hungarian artist, Grigor Gabo. They go from revolutionary Hungary to the Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s, then to England from 1936 onwards. Following in the style of the titled scenes found in Fair Slaughter, the backdrop to each scene is a drawing or cartoon by either of the artists. Grigor commits himself to the tradition of classical idealist art, the line as stay against chaos, beauty as the goal, art as healing perfection. The play opens with him trying to draw the line of the breasts of a naked woman in the middle of the war. Bela sees only a woman and, as a sex-starved soldier, wants to rape her. Grigor's subject is always Woman. In the fourth scene of the third act he wants to leave Moscow with Bela's wife, Ilona, and create a life of primitive purity in the woods. Bela believes this action to be irresponsible -- an escape -- given the current political climate, and criticizes Grigor for his regressive matriarchal

---

42.

[50] Tony Dunn, "Howard Barker: Socialist Playwright For Our Times," Gambit, 41 (London: Calder, 1984): 66.

primitivism.[51]

> Make her your idol if you like. Her parts, her fecund this, her fertile that. Go down on your knees and lick her, offer up dead lambs on the altar of her magic cunt, carve women with large bellies and rudimentary heads.[52]

Woman as earth-goddess or, as at the end of the scene, Stalin as infallible father, are both icons and for Bela the real struggle is against the blinding effects of worship. Grigor's final works of art are paint-by-number pictures and jigsaw puzzles. He begins the last scene in hospital claiming he is the vessel of God's will and can raise bedpans at a distance. Idealism terminates in conservative form and metaphysics.

Bela chooses the cartoon as the most effective contribution of art to social change. It is quick, cheap, satirical, immediately perceptible and frees the artist from the burden of elitist genius. He states in his talk to the Brave New World Club, RAF Basingbourne at the beginning of Act II:

> The cartoon is a weapon in the struggle of peoples. It is a liberating instrument. It is brief like life. It is not about me. It is about us. Important art is about us. Great art is about me.[53]

At this point in the play (1943) he is a national figure, with cartoons in the Mirror. The next scene is a clash between the political integrity of the artist and the political integrity

---

[51] Dunn 67.

[52] Barker, No End of Blame 25.

[53] Barker, No End of Blame 32.

of power. The backdrop is a cartoon entitled "There always was a Second Front."[54]; it shows an English soldier struggling with Hitler, a profiteer is trying to strangle the soldier from behind. In response, three government representatives are in the newspaper office demanding action over the cartoon's content. They report that Winston does not like the cartoon. "First thing this morning he was practically pissing blood,"[55] says Deeds, the most aggressive of them. The cartoon implies there are divisions in the national unity. They want a public apology and no repetition or they will close the paper down. Stringer, the editor, tries to defend the paper but Deeds points out the omnipotence of the Defence of the Realm Act. Bela defends himself by saying, "My politics are to look for the truth, and when you find it, shout it. That's my politics."[56] To this Lowry points out that Bela is an alien; having come to England from the Soviet Union, he can be considered a threat to national security and incarcerated under the Aliens Act. Bela makes them confess that they consider the war to be as much against the Soviet Union as Nazi Germany, and as a maid enters to serve tea he tries to draw her into the political discussion so that she may offer a worker's perspective. The officials are enraged -- "that is

---

[54] Barker, No End of Blame 35.

[55] Barker, No End of Blame 36.

[56] Barker, No End of Blame 38.

ABSOLUTELY NOT DONE HERE"[57] shouts Deeds -- and only Stringer's promise of immediate and abject apology prevents immediate closure. At the end of the scene Bela tries to talk again with the maid. He speculates on 'love' as the alternative to freedom. The woman answers in stoic cliches. He says he is an artist and has drawn a lot of women. She shows a flicker of interest. But Bela realizes that Grigor's worship is not for him. He's using art as a cover for seduction.

Bela eventually comes to the conclusion -- as does Barker to a certain degree -- that the artist can never be free. Freedom, like the line in a drawing is something manmade and does not exist in nature. As Bela tells Grigor:

> Line is an invention of mankind... Line is the means by which we venture in to the formlessness of nature, which guides us through the labyrinth... He who draws a line puts form on formlessness. The line describes unconsciousness.[58]

Therefore the expression of art, the symbol, be it a line or word, will never quite capture the essence of nature, but only impose a form upon it. The line can never be free because by its very nature it confines freedom. Mocking Grigor, Bela instructs a model to "be a form, Stella. Be art. Thank you! There. Perfect form. No grievance. No sin. No spit. No shit."[59] Bela learns to trust impulse over form. Seeing his own actions as the only form of visual truth, and believing

---

[57] Barker, No End of Blame 40.

[58] Barker, No End of Blame 44.

[59] Barker, No End of Blame 10.

that impulse is the only way to true expression, Bela attempts to make his death a public act of truth. He tries to jump off Tower Bridge. The river-police try to talk him out of it. "You see," says constable Hoogstraten, "I don't think you want to die at all."[60] Bela does not want to discuss his motives or his life. But Hoogstraten has taken a course in psychology and persists: "You see - no one really wants to die."

> BELA. I do.
> HOOG. No, you only think you do.
> BELA. Of course I think I do.
> HOOG. That's it, you see.
> BELA. What is?[61]

Impasse, because for Hoogstraten thought means illusion compared with reality, while for Bela it means conceptual processes which must lead to action. Suicide seemed the only truthful way to express the censorship of his thought by society; his death was to be a true expression because death is a part of nature. His death is prevented by the police, however, and the end of the play shows his confinement in a mental institution. His experiences in the institution seem to mean total enclosure, which is a pessimistic end for artistic impulse. But his lines at the very end of the play seem to suggest he will keep trying to capture that impulse in some artistic form:

> Give us a pencil...somebody...(*He staggers out of the chair, advances toward the audience*) Give us a pencil...give us a pencil...give us a

---

[60] Barker, No End of Blame 50.

[61] Barker, No End of Blame 51.

pencil...(*Fade to black*).[62]

Barker's search for dramatic form to fully express his oppositional impulse dominates his plays from this point onward. Impulse as it is expressed through art is further explored in his radio -- turned stage -- play Scenes from an Execution, and impulse as it is expressed through sexual love emerges in The Love of a Good Man, and reaches its peak in The Castle. Like Bela, Barker is an artist whose politics aim to reveal the truth. Moving into the hostile neo-conservative decade of the 1980s, more than ever before, Barker's playwriting attempts to uphold the truth of impulse. During the 1970s all of Barker's plays had sprung from a strong socialist resolve; by the 1980s, deeper consideration of the imaginative potential of his art told him that theatre was not effective as propaganda, but rather as an art of subverting propaganda. Like Bela, he was searching for the truthful impulse behind the politics, the desire of humanity within the forms and conventions created throughout history for political purposes.

This perspective had much to do with the political climate at the time. In Thatcher's England, there was a populism shared by both Labour and Conservative parties; which for Barker, presented some interesting contradictions:

> The populism of the radical left, as represented by Ken Livingstone [Greater London Council], isn't very far from the populism recognized by

---

[62] Barker, No End of Blame 55.

> Thatcherites which says, more or less, 'Well, you want a popular culture, they'll provide it.' It will probably be rock music. So rock music is the essence of popular culture. It makes money. It's cash-viable and it's extremely bad for your mind - it doesn't oblige you to do anything, it's a soporific culture...If you look at the left, the sort of thing Ken Livingstone wanted to establish on his GLC budget tended to be rock concerts. Because that's what the black kids down in Brixton want: they want reggae. So you see the two extremes hold hands in the middle on the basis that somehow there is a people's culture.[63]

The complexity of Barker's plays in the 1980s earned him a reputation of being an elitist. Barker claimed that his plays constituted a theatre that was 'elite in imagination'. He explains:

> I discovered that the only things worth describing are things that do not happen, just as the only history plays worth writing concern themselves with what did not occur...Writing now has to engage with what is not seen [i.e. imagination] because real life is annexed, reproduced, soporific.[64]

Barker's plays of imagination still packed political clout, but on a much deeper level. Barker began to trust his audience enough not to have to instruct it, but rather leave the decisions about his plays in their hands. In addition to questioning the play, he hoped this impulse would lead people to also ask questions of themselves. Barker envisioned: "A theatre which dares to return the audience to its soul, which has been seen by the left for so long as given, material,

---

[63] Finlay Donesky, "Oppression, Resistance, and the Writer's Testament," New Theatre Quarterly, 8 (Summer 1986): 340.

[64] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 19.

finite, oppressed, will experience the hostility a wrecked ship feels for the gale."[65]

Barker had always received critical acclaim for his competence with language. His ability with language became stronger through the 1980s. He felt if a true, rich, complex language was given to the actor, the possibility of rupturing the banality of communication in a commercially-saturated society might occur.

An exercise in developing language for Barker was the radio play, and he wrote many in this period. Scenes from an Execution began as a radio play, but was eventually developed for stage because of its theatrical potential and popularity.

The play takes place in sixteenth century Venice. An artist, Galactia, has been commissioned by the Doge to paint a large public mural to commemorate the Venetian naval victory over the Turkish fleet. The word "execution," in the title, refers to two things. First, the execution of Galactia's huge painting, depicting the Battle of Lapanto. Second, it questions *who* is to be executed, which is the real battle of the play. The Doge wants a painting which will celebrate the glory of the Christian state over the infidel Turk. Galactia, moving through the play from sketches to finished product, finally represents the truth of the battle as she sees it, a scene of violence, viciousness and futile sacrifice by the common sailor. Not to do this would be to kill her own

---

[65] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 19.

integrity. For doing this she is imprisoned in the infamous Venetian dungeons under threat of death. The price of patronage is therefore the major theme of the play,[66] what The Sketchbook, which acts as Chorus throughout, calls "the obsession alongside the commission."[67]

Galactia's struggle with the Doge is mediated by a crucial third party, the critic, chiefly represented by Gina Rivera ("distinguished critic, poet, and sensualist"[68]), but a role also undertaken by Carpeta and other fellow-painters. Rivera shuttles between the Doge and Galactia, reassuring the first and interpreting the second, talking art to the politician and politics to the artist. She is neither humble nor proud. She simply knows her exact position in the structure of power and is determined to maintain it. That position depends on a fourth party, the public, whose eye is sought by all, and which is the most unstable and unknowable element of all. Scene 17 finishes with Galactia released from prison. Rivera has interceded for her with the Doge. The artist is enraged and delighted. "I cannot be released," she shouts. "How can they release me? I am too dangerous!"[69] The

---

[66] Tony Dunn, "Massacre of the Culpable," Plays and Players (October 1984): 13.

[67] Howard Barker, The Castle; Scenes from an Execution (London: Calder, 1985) 47.

[68] Barker, Scenes from an Execution 62.

[69] Barker, Scenes from an Execution 85.

Man in the Next Cell, who did nothing and will therefore never be released, is suitably distressed: "Please enjoy your freedom quietly'" he pleads. But Galactia's intransigence against the state is doubled by her response: "I'll paint you! I'll paint you and I will show your innocence!...TRUTH OF THE IMPERIAL JURISDICTION!...EXPOSE THE TRUTH AND BACK I'LL COME![70] She will paint his innocence, expose the truth of imperial law and be returned to the dungeons.

The next three scenes, which conclude the play, firmly locate the oppositional artist not outside, but inside and against the structure of power. We discover that the act of criticising a regime's power entails a somewhat complicit stance within its power structure. The Battle of Lapanto, as Galactia has painted it, is exhibited. The Doge declares the Republic can absorb even this affront. "There will be no art outside. Only art inside."[71] Her fellow-painters express petty disapproval of the work. Galactia rages at Rivera for conciliating the Doge. The painting is a popular success with the public. Galactia accepts an invitation to dine with the Doge in the last line of the play. Here then is a rapid lay-out of the four coordinates which constitute the play's diagram of power. Artist and politician and critic and the public define the perimeter of social space within which the

---

[70] Barker, Scenes from an Execution 86.

[71] Barker, Scenes from an Execution 86.

art-work breathes or expires, moves or ossifies.[72]

In No End of Blame, the artist-protagonist struggles for honesty, and in the process isolates himself from his fellow-artists and his public. He finishes in a mental institution, accused by the doctor of hugging his truth and genius to himself. Bela's job is to be out in the world, fixing the blame for the disasters of society on those who create them. Three years later, Barker acknowledges that the state thrives on straightforward opposition. The isolated artist fighting the hard-nosed Committee is firmly established in our repertoire of agonistic images. 'Outside and against' justifies the existence of both parties. Artists have no power and great imagination. The state has no imagination and great power. Barker saw the need for a complexity in his work which on the surface would express complicity, but if explored revealed critical truths. The reality of Thatcherism in England of the 1980s was that an artist with imagination, seeking critical expression of the political regime, had to do so in complex expression that relied heavily upon an audience to make meaning from their experience of it. Barker comments,

> I found in the study of the artist himself the cause that was neither wholly self nor the rattling egotism of entertainment, (which I also owned, but was suspicious of). This was a sense of artistic responsibility both to order and to violation, on the one hand to language and the literary culture which was equipment only a fool tossed away, either out of wrong opposition or false solidarity with the uneducated, and on the other, to the furthest

---

[72] Dunn, "Massacre of the Culpable" 14.

> reaches of speculation whether of desire or dissolution. I found the greatest moments in theatre were the most ambiguous, and truth, a thing we now hardly dare invoke, came only by excellence of the performer grinding on the complexity of text, and when it worked, worked against the will.[73]

Language continued to play a central role in Barker's theatre, for it offered many radical possibilities as a means of confronting and subverting societal expectations in the theatre. In an attempt to engage his audience at a level deeper still, Barker cast off a theatrical element which had been inherent in his language since his earliest plays -- satire.

> The time for satire is ended. Nothing can be satirized in the authoritarian state. It is a culture reduced to playing the spoons. The stockbroker laughs, and the satirist plays the spoons.[74]

With the neo-conservatism of the Thatcher era, the gap between pretence and reality, once the foundation for satire in the English theatre, was no longer there. Essentially, the government of Margaret Thatcher, glorified in its own decadence, could enact any harsh policy on the public with no apology or cover-up because they propagated the belief that a 'survival of the fittest' social environment was most economically sound. One was obliged to 'pull himself up by the bootstraps' and if that was not possible then the individual was to blame. Thatcherism openly accepted a greater polarity

---

[73] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 21.

[74] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 11.

between rich and poor. In this hostile environment, Barker shunned what he saw as the superficiality of satire, given the current state of society. With so much right-wing political conviction in the air Barker searched for a humour in his language which might fragment people's conviction, and address areas of consciousness that emerge from underneath their preconceived notions. For Barker, this became less to do with exploring social structures such as politics, and more to do with internal urges such as sex. By exploring the desires which lay beneath social forms and conventions, Barker's plays could now address deeper human experiences of freedom, truth, and submission.

The Castle, which begins with the aphorism: "What is Politics, but the Absence of Desire...?"[75], was Barker's first attempt to explore the power of instinct. Initially the play was written to discover some metaphorical basis for talking about scientific mayhem. Barker's premise is interesting in that it combines some of his political concerns from previous plays:

> I want to approach the issue of mayhem in science by showing the alienation of the spirit of inquiry from needs of community. The way in which the resources of human society are funnelled into mechanics of destruction is a sickness without parallel in human history.[76]

Barker explores what he perceived as the wilful suppression of

---

[75] Barker, The Castle: Scenes from an Execution 1.

[76] Dunn, "Interview with Howard Barker" 33.

curiosity in people at the time. He was disturbed at what he saw as a terrible lack of interest in instinctual knowledge among the public; their pursuit instead for greater technology to amass facts and data. He likened this avoidance instinct to another contemporary trend, contempt for sexuality.

> Sexuality *is* a tremendous risk if entered into with a spirit of truth and true exploration...a very dangerous and subversive thing.[77]

Barker's metaphor for The Castle was also a pseudo-historical one, the return of crusaders to an English village. They bring with them an Arab mathematician, a crippled spirit who is an expert in fortification. Barker envisioned the castle in the English feudal village as a twin symbol -- "both of protection and oppression. Where does one pass into the other? That is a very relevant question for now."[78] The returning feudal lord brings back a technology of repression. This technology constitutes itself in repression of sexuality because of what has happened to the estate while the soldiers were away. The village has become feminized. Different values, as well as female labour, have come to predominate. The women's social and sexual values are then attacked by the returning men. For Barker, the themes in the play were very much his consideration of the contemporary events concerning Greenham Common -- the women's encampment of many months, located in protest outside the American missile/airbase at

---

[77] Donesky 339.

[78] Dunn, "Interview with Howard Barker," 34.

Greenham Common, England. In the wake of the Falkland Island conflict, and the return of English soldiers from battle, along with the American warhead technology housed at the base, the parallels helped make The Castle Barker's most popular play ever.

The play emphasizes the power of instinct which is overcome and killed by order. The crusaders return home, weary from their travels and pillaging, to find their estate has been transformed into an aspiring paradise. Appalled, the soldiers set about building a castle on the natural contours of the hill side; their captured Arab mathematician helps them in this quest. Through the course of the play the hillside is transformed into an angular fortification; while the community is overrun with discipline. From an egalitarian existence among the women, all overgrown and natural, the village is transformed into an all-male hierarchy. The height of this metamorphosis is achieved when the sound of a jet plane anachronistically flies overhead.

Skinner, the hardest and most radical of the women, the one who would make the world an all-female ghetto, turns assassin in an attempt to protest the male onslaught. Having killed one of the men constructing the castle, she is caught and viciously tortured by having her victim's body chained to her. She miraculously survives this ordeal and is eventually worshipped for her fortitude. The people's worship gives Skinner power, and it becomes evident that she will wield it

with absolute cruelty. Suddenly, indeed surprisingly, radical feminism is accused of being obverse Thatcherism. In the case of women as well as men, compassion is killed by expertise.

In referring to this phenomenon, and its relationship to the Greenham Common protest and the women's movement in general, Barker comments:

> The arguments and counter-arguments are no longer very relevant... It has always seemed to me that in a rather disturbing way that every argument has its counter-argument, and one arrives at conviction not always out of logic at all. The particular state this society is in at the moment is one in which politics is becoming exhausted as a subject-matter simply because the ability of experts to marshal information. Even on the nuclear issue, for example, which seems to me extremely simple...[79]

Many feminist groups in England lauded The Castle for what they believed was its expressed feminism. Barker's response was that he would not describe himself as a feminist playwright, and that his

> plays will not be feminist plays any more than they're socialist plays. I will follow the demands of my imagination before I consider my responsibilities to any movement. Any contradictions that arise from this I rejoice in.[80]

In this declaration, indeed in the play, Barker had begun to mine the depths of the experiential possibilities of his theatre. The audience is challanged to view their history for more than nostalgic purposes; to hack away at comforting images of the past in order to evoke or unlock feelings about

---

[79] Donesky 338.

[80] Dunn, "Interview with Howard Barker" 39.

the present.[81] This was meant to create a heightened awareness for an audience member because the confrontation was not based on political belief, but rather a subversion of conventional thought. Barker saw the potential for the theatre to do this extremely well:

> (The theatre) is not a good propaganda art, but it is very good for loosing the matrix of received wisdom, unpicking habits and responses, setting up healthy confusions, and above all, giving form to the lurking public will, the thing that the public believes but can't articulate, and which is repressed under so much propaganda, or just as sinister, theory.[82]

The dramaturgical relationship Barker was beginning to establish with his audience was one of openness of interpretation. Each individual audience member was responsible for constructing a personal meaning from the experience of the play. Barker thus began to honour his audience by trusting them enough to give them an active-interpretive role in the theatrical process.

The final stage of development in Barker's playwriting form leading up to the Theatre of Catastrophe is that of anti-history.[83] Perhaps the most striking example of this concept

---

[81] Dunn, "Interview with Howard Barker" 43.

[82] Dunn, "Interview with Howard Barker" 43.

[83] In Arguments for a Theatre, Barker has referred to The Europeans as a Theatre of Catastrophe play. This is based upon what he describes as the "individual's ability to effect self-identification in a collective or historical nightmare." (61) This indeed is a premise of the Theatre of Catastrophe;

is seen in The Europeans. Subtitled "Struggles to Love," it represents a preface to the Theatre of Catastrophe in that the characters attempt to assert their individual experience in the same way that the audience is expected to do, in judgement of the play. The play's central conflict is what Barker describes as a moment of beauty when we see "(a) collision between two wills, the will of the irrational protagonist (the non-ideological) and the will of the irrational state (the official ideological)."[84] The play takes place in the aftermath of the repulse of Islam from the heart of Europe. After the liberation of Vienna in 1683, the Christian emperor is busy rebuilding the culture, but he cannot count on the support of his national hero, the liberator, Starhemberg. Since the end of the war, Starhemberg has become obsessed with a love of a woman, Katrin, the victim of an atrocity during the war. Starhemberg's pursuit of her love opens up new truths

---

however, I have chosen to place it amongst his earlier work for the following reasons. First, although the play received its first production in Toronto in 1990, it was originally written in 1985, commissioned but not mounted by the RSC. Second, stylistically it is what Barker has described as a "'rolling epic', or what you might call (a) linear-epic play." (Donesky, "Oppression, Resistance, and the Writer's Testament" 337) Thus, I have placed it before The Possibilities in the Barker canon because the latter represents his first departure from a linear narrative; which was to become a significant aspect of his later plays in the Theatre of Catastrophe.

[84] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 61.

which draw him into conflict with the power and decorum of the Christian Empire.

The play deals with anti-history in the sense that Katrin, who eventually enlists the help of Starhemberg, tries to make her atrocity -- the rape and maiming by Islamic soldiers -- public knowledge, in order to prevent her pain from becoming subsumed in the "anodyne reconciliations which pass for public history."[85] Refusing to let the biological evidence of her violation degenerate into a statistic, she delivers the child which is one of the products of her ordeal, in a public place, struggling even against the midwives to establish the primacy of her experience over the public interest. This scene, which contains the beauty of childbirth and the terror of rape, is deeply unsettling because Katrin at her most assertive and irrational point in the play exposes the false content of the values that are being imposed on her, and reveals the public's pity, reconciliation and forgetfulness of the war's horrors as instruments of political oppression. This is what Barker has termed "the annihilation of individual pain in collective orthodoxy"[86], or the anti-history which is concealed by the false decorum of history.

It is Barker's hope that the audience will endeavour to find meaning in this struggle applicable to their own lives. The moment of Katrin's greatest conflict in the play,

---

[85] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 61.

[86] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 61.

that of the public birthing, is a moment of 'wrong action'. Its 'wrongness' is its source of disturbance for the audience. The anxiety of this spectacle is enlarged into the dramatic form of the play because the initially offensive nature of the action is rapidly revealed to have its own justifications in the struggle of the character to achieve some self-identification. The audience, forced to re-view, re-feel, a 'wrong' action, is provoked and alerted, and must consider the moral dilemma thrust before them. Nobody is given any theory or ideology to affirm or not; rather all must come to their own understanding of a complex act. Barker sees this offering of an active emotional and intellectual involvement in the play's process as the best way to honour his audience.

> A theatre which honours the audience will not therefore make an icon of clarity. If a scene might mean two things it should be played for its opposites. This is not to say a new theatre will 'see both sides of the question', which is impotence and stagnation. It will rather emphasize the essential instability of character and the untrustworthiness of opinion. We need a theatre of Anti-Parable, in which the moral is made by the audience and not by the actor. Naturally, this means the parable will be interpreted differently by different individuals. A good parable should provoke an argument and not a submissive nod of the head.[87]

Through the course of the play, Starhemberg becomes devoted to Katrin. His love for her, despite her appearance, leads him into rebellion against the state's aesthetic ideal of beauty; due to his high status, this sends a shockwave into

---

[87] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 45.

the emperor's ideal of order. The play shows that the body can be a conventional ground for controlled desire, and thereby one of the undeclared cornerstones of the state. The freedom that Katrin and Starhemberg discover comes through locating sexual power in the frame of experience. Pain relates desire to the interior life rather than in the skin-deep fascination of the icon. Katrin's atrocious condition is a spur to desire in Starhemberg, her eroticism lying precisely in her impossible-to-assimilate history. She has none of the functions of fertility, as her maiming involved cutting off her breasts, she is unable to feed an infant. By loving Katrin Starhemberg publicly breaks the silent contract of socialized love.

Beginning with a left-wing political background and agenda, Barker set the stage for his plays. Seeking to claim a culture that was "frantic with images, fevered with pictures and products, visually sick"[88] he created a theatre from his ability with language. For him words had been maimed, "pulped into headlines,"[89] or given over to naturalism in his culture. He left the naturalistic form of playwriting, having fully expressed his working-class experience with Claw and Stripwell.

Seeing socialism in England as a tragedy, he wrote Fair Slaughter; through his characters, he repeatedly studied

---

[88] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 15.

[89] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 15.

its failure. Eventually, with That Good Between Us, Barker found it possible to begin a play without socialism and find it within the play. His plays of the late 1970s and early 1980s began to express a playwright's not knowing; this was a difficult challenge for an audience used to being told how to think and what to do. Being led to explore his own purpose, and that of the artist in society through plays like No End of Blame and Scenes from an Execution, Barker found himself no longer wanting to tell the audience anything. Rather, he wanted to invite their participation in the hunting down of inner truths.

This inward journey made his work less satirical -- a trait found in his language from the beginning. To be a satirist, one must know, and as he explored humanity through the actions of his characters the less he knew. The deterioration of habitual moral and political assumptions was the sole means by which a change in his form became possible.[90] Barker's theatrical form began to explore the acts of violence at the heart of this social collapse, in the dawn of Thatcherism. Taking his dramatic action out onto vast landscapes with The Hang of the Gaol and The Castle, he was able to explore the truth about structures of society in their manifestations of human consciousness; just as the castle in The Castle is not a set but an outcome of spiritual despair, the burned out jail in The Hang of the Gaol is a massive shade

---

[90] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 16.

of frustrated longing.[91]

Presenting the instinctual and intuitive journeys of his characters, Barker hoped that his audience would be inspired to embark upon a similar exploration. He found, in collaboration with actors and directors, a truly unique and sacred experience for an audience in his work. A theatre in which the audience must reciprocate this offering and work themselves to achieve this experience.

With the Theatre of Catastrophe, the tension between the audience and the play becomes the aesthetic, the nature of the experience. This involves challenges to common morality, common socialism, even what passes for common humanity. The theatre becomes a dynamic stage; that is to say a foundation, for assessment of society and potential reconstruction.

---

[91] Barker, Arguments for a Theatre 17.

CHAPTER TWO

THE POSSIBILITIES IN THE THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE

We fail to think correctly
There is the hope
We persist in our blindness
There is the hope
We are intransigent at the wrong moment
And capitulate at the wrong moment
There is the sole chance of deliverance

(Preface to the Radio version of The Possibilities).[92]

The Theatre of Catastrophe attempts to initiate a relationship with its audience that will challenge the way they create meaning in their lives. This challenge is achieved primarily by subverting traditional forms and conventions of society and their reflection in the culture of contemporary theatre.[93] Since the late 1960's, Barker's plays have provided a blueprint for a theatre which attempts to establish oppositional form which may adequately convey oppositional content. The aim of the Theatre of Catastrophe is to create a tension between the audience and the play. For Barker this has become an aesthetic: the nature of experience in theatre which

---

[92] Howard Barker, Lullabies for the Impatient (London: Calder, 1988) 1.

[93] For the purpose of this analysis culture is defined as a particular form, stage, or type of intellectual development that is a part of a society's customs and organisation as a community.

is meant to challenge an audience's beliefs and the way they construct reality in their lives.

The Theatre of Catastrophe is offered to a society which Barker believes is rampant with political authoritarianism, and the marshalling of information down to the simplicity of facts and figures by so-called professionals. His theatre reviles such a narrowing of perspectives; offering instead, complexity, the dissolution of coherent meaning, and an openness for each audience member to decide about what s/he has seen. It is hoped that the possibilities of interpretation are many.

As his characters reconstruct themselves from their experiences, so too may the audience. In this respect, Howard Barker asks his audience to play an important role in the making of his theatre. The Theatre of Catastrophe is one of anti-parable; that is, the audience must individually derive their own meaning from what they have experienced. The theatre becomes an active event and thereby a vital cultural ritual is established. As a cultural experience it is meant to challenge an audience's common morality, common socialism, and even what passes for common humanity. In Barker's own words, "the theatre became for me a ground for assessment and potential reconstruction."[94] The challenge for practitioner and audience alike is to experience Barker's texts in the same

---

[94] Howard Barker, Arguments For A Theatre (London: Calder, 1989) 17.

light he does.

> Obviously, the English theatre is in crisis. Equally obviously, its crisis reflects the crisis in the liberal intelligentsia which owns the theatre. This crisis is an intellectual one. The question, 'What kind of theatre do we want?' is best answered from the point of view of 'What kind of audience do we want?' We are in fear of our own audience, as a poor teacher is afraid of the class.[95]

As the public plays such a vital role in the formation of the Theatre of Catastrophe, an audience's relationship to the work must be clearly understood. In the next three chapters, as part of a dramaturgical analysis of The Possibilities and The Last Supper, close examination will be made of the audience role -- as suggested by the text -- in the creation of the Theatre of Catastrophe of which these plays are a part.

In his study of Barker's plays and poetry entitled Howard Barker: Politics and Desire, David Ian Rabey concludes that

> Barker's drama and poetry seek to demonstrate that the dominant conventional social terms of definition of possibilities are neither exhaustive nor complete. His writing works through passionate insistence on the human consequences of power: pain. Pain is articulated in all viewpoints on the political act: in the political victim (Katrin), in the renegade hijacking and disrupting the symbolism of the state (Starhemberg), in the managers of the symbolism of state (Leopold), and in the symbolism of the state itself - instances when the symbolism of state is human (Concilia) being particularly

---

[95] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 43.

troubling.[96]

Beyond The Europeans, and its unique character relationship cited in Rabey's example, The Possibilities explores pain in the political act through form as well as content. The Possibilities is a collection of ten short plays, each exploring the hypothesis that conviction and subsequent action overwhelm logic or rationality.[97] Written in 1986, the collection came in the wake of a number of Barker's 'history' plays, like The Europeans, called "linear-epic plays"[98] by Barker himself.[99] With The Possibilities Barker attempted to create a new form for a historical epic play. As he explains,

> "I'm trying to get an epic quality which is vertical - or that's the only way I can think of it, which may be psychological or something. I want the scale, but I don't want the narrative unfolding the way it does in Victory, for instance, I'm tired of that.[100]

The culmination of Barker's impulse for a vertical quality in these plays amounted to the initial tenets of the dramaturgical form found in the Theatre of Catastrophe: a

---

[96] David Ian Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire (London: MacMillan, 1989) 243.

[97] Rabey 246.

[98] Examples of which are The Power of The Dog, Victory, Scenes From An Execution, and The Castle.

[99] Finlay Donesky, "Oppression, Resistance, and the Writer's Testament," New Theatre Quarterly, 8 (Summer 1986): 337.

[100] Donesky 337.

disavowal of logic in character and setting. Barker soon termed this perspective "anti-history," where history is examined for its disruptions as opposed to conciliatory moments, a depiction of historical events is seen that do not follow any singular narrative but resonate throughout time, resembling many different historical periods as well as having contemporary significance. The setting, time, and characters found in the plays of The Possibilities are all open to interpretation by the audience.

The ten plays of The Possibilities initially invite parallels with Brecht's Lehrstucke, or instruction pieces, but this comparison is artfully invited only to be disrupted. As David Ian Rabey suggests, in comparison to Brecht, "The Possibilities might aptly be called Zerreisstucke, discord pieces."[101] Barker's approach to his audience has some interesting comparisons and contrasts with Brecht. Both have an agenda to prompt the audience to become an active part in their theatre; however, they go about the form of creating this relationship in vastly different ways.

Before discussing The Possibilities in detail, it is important to outline audience reception theory in order to distinguish how Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe works in relation to its audience from the better known practices of Brecht and other theorists of the latter 20th Century.

In her book Theatre Audiences, Susan Bennett proposes

---

[101] Rabey 246.

that since Brecht there has been great development on the part of western theatre practitioners to make the audience a central part of the performance process, and yet there has been very little documentation or understanding of how this process works dramaturgically. The Theatre of Catastrophe extends the phenomenon of audience involvement into a new and unique dimension, and Bennett's theories are a good starting point for the following exploration.

Bennett advances a theory of production and reception for audiences of contemporary western theatre, which helps to elucidate Barker's work as she establishes two theatrical frames for analysis. The outer frame is concerned with the theatre as a cultural construct through the idea of the theatrical event, the practitioners' approach to production, and the audience's definitions and expectations of a performance. The inner frame contains the event itself and, in particular, the spectator's experience of a fictional stage world, rooted in the play's written text. This second frame encompasses production strategies, ideological overcoding, and the material conditions of performance. The intersection of the two frames forms the spectator's cultural understanding and experience of theatre.[102] From the viewpoint of the practitioner, Bennett's model provides a means of elevating the theatre to a vital cultural station in society, as

---

[102] Susan Bennett, Theatre Audiences (London: Routledge, 1990) 1-2.

cultural assumptions affect performances and performances re-write cultural assumptions.[103]

Like Barker, Bennett believes that the spectator's role in the theatre has been greatly reduced by naturalistic aesthetics which tend to put more emphasis on creating illusion for an audience than inviting their involvement. Her analysis begins with Brecht's *Verfrumdungseffekt*, citing his view that capitalistic society ingests whatever it needs to sustain it, not that which will change it, irrespective of whether the form of the society in question is good or bad. She continues to identify a number of starting points, established by Brecht, for the study of audiences in theatre. For example, Brecht consolidated a developing theatre practice self-consciously concerned with production and reception. Performance began to be viewed as a cooperative venture, and the audience's centrality to the dramatic process acknowledged.[104]

As the Theatre of Catastrophe endows its audience with a great deal of interpretative responsibility, it seems appropriate to consider the lesson learned by Brecht and practitioners who have espoused his work in more recent decades. Namely, an audience that desires change in society

---

[103] See Chapter Four for further discussion of Bennett's outer frame of audience reception theory.

[104] Bennett 31.

may develop a horizon of expectation for the theatre as a cultural institution which promotes political change; this desire may facilitate an active audience. Unfortunately, as is too often the case, the theatre is not a vital cultural institution but one dominated by escapist entertainments. Barker asserts:

> It is always the case that the audience is willing to know more, and to endure more, than the dramatist or producer trusts it with. The audience has been treated as a child even by the best theatres. It has been led to the meaning, as if truth were a lunch. The theatre is not a disseminator of truth but a provider of versions. Its statements are provisional. In a time when nothing is clear, the inflicting of clarity is a stale arrogance.[105]

Trusting his audience to make meaning from their experience in the theatre, Barker does not patronize them with prescriptions about political change, as previous practitioners have.

Barker desires a relationship between his play and each audience member[106] which is in many respects akin to reader response theory (reader/text) as it outlined by Norman N. Holland:

> Identity recreates itself...That is, all of us, as we read, use the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation. We interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work as we interpret

---

[105] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 44.

[106] The terms 'spectator' and 'audience member' shall be used inter-changeably in this study to refer to an individual in an audience.

it.[107]

This view begs the question, Do we all possess unique identity-themes, which we replicate in our readings of literary texts? Or, Are views often shared? Barker's work grapples with the question of unity between text and audience member.

David Ian Rabey has called The Possibilities "a crucial affirmation of spirit versus logic and rationalism at the service of ideology."[108] In all ten of its plays, characters demonstrate and expose that the possession of irrefutable 'truth', as conventionally and ideologically defined, is insufficient reason for acquiescence when truth is subjected to personal terms of definition.[109] To achieve this effect, the plays of The Possibilities gradually transgress what Barker calls the "two sacred groves of contemporary theatre - Clarity and Realism."[110] The given circumstances become more and more a matter of audience interpretation with each play. The increasing ambiguity of situation, alongside the potential for contradiction in each character's argument, eliminates the sense that Barker is

---

[107] Norman N. Holland, "Unity, Identity, Self, Text," Reader-Response Criticism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) 124.

[108] Rabey 246.

[109] Rabey 246.

[110] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 51.

giving his audience any specific message. The Possibilities, like all Theatre of Catastrophe plays, is written with a view that clarity and realism are ideological constructs imposed on individuals, and in turn it demands that each audience member break free of this societal mindset, and individually decide what is real.

The Possibilities was first produced at the Almeida Theatre in 1988 by a group of actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company, calling themselves *Not The RSC*. Essentially these performers found themselves dedicated to Barker's writing after attempting a few of his plays during his RSC season in 1985. Michael Ratcliffe's praise in the Observer of the company's efforts is testimony to their commitment: "Good actors are never frightened of writers who raise their game."[111] The mid-1980s were a difficult time for alternative theatre in England. In this tough economic period, right and left-wing political bodies joined forces in an attempt to eradicate all funding to theatre not providing "the depressed peoples... with song and (entertaining) oblivion."[112] Director Ian McDiarmid wanted his audience to be well aware of the threatening environment in which the artists presenting the play were forced to live; the handbill distributed with the program was effective in making a spectator consider this threat in light of the play. Critic

---

[111] London Theatre Records, 12-25, February, 1988, 230.

[112] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 53.

Michael Billington comments:

> Entering the Almeida for the first night of Howard Barker's The Possibilities, we were handed a press release announcing a 12 per cent cut by Greater London Arts in their grant to the theatre of 190,000 pounds sterling. Amongst the reasons given were that the audience is insufficiently multi-racial and that the Almeida does not give the highest priority to black arts and multi-racial casting.
>
> I agree that these are important priorities. What worries me is the increasing use of grant-cutting, both by left and right, as a political tactic. The arms-length principle of subsidy, which used to be an article of faith, is gradually being replaced by the strong-arm method in which subvention is used as a lever of power.[113]

The Possibilities offered its London audience moments of risk -- of imagination and invention. Comfort was quickly abandoned for conflict, experienced between the audience and what it witnessed. Barker had hoped the audience might feel pain, even resentment, at its exposure to his play:

> It is distinctly not an experience associated with entertainment, and consequently an audience needs to be both prepared and, as is the case with all new theatre, educated in its own freedom. Not being conducted either by fetishisms of clarity or realism, it must be liberated by its fear of obscurity and encouraged to welcome its moments of loss.[114]

For Barker, these moments of loss for the audience are achieved dramaturgically by breaking the narrative thread, suspending the story, the use of obliquely related interludes, as well as other devices designed to complicate and overwhelm

---

[113] Michael Billington, Guardian 27 February 1988: 32.

[114] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 53.

the audience's habitual method of seeing.

Audience expectation is undermined in two ways. First, the violence and catastrophe most audience members would associate with war and battlegrounds far outside their homes gradually take root within the domestic setting, creating terror from the inside out. Concurrent with this development, Barker moves into more abstract dramatization with each of the ten plays, demanding greater individual interpretation on the part of the audience. By the tenth play, in many respects, each spectator is left to fend for him/herself, relying more on instinct than intellectual or analytical habits.

THE WEAVER'S ECSTASY AT THE DISCOVERY OF NEW COLOUR:

The Weaver's Ecstasy at the Discovery of New Colour, has six characters, each embodying a generic identity: The Woman, The Man, The Girl, The Boy, First Soldier and Second Soldier. Apart from these general titles, the stage directions tell us that the first four characters are "A FAMILY OF TURKS...*weaving a rug*" and that outside the place they are working there is "the noise of a bombardment."[115] Of the ten plays in the series, *The Weaver's Ecstasy* provides the most realistic, readily discernible context: a domestic work

---

[115] Howard Barker, The Possibilities (London: Calder, 1987) 9. All other citations from this text will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be given within parentheses and inserted in the text.

setting. As the rest of the plays unfold, however, such familiar characteristics become obscured.

The play begins at an intense pitch as The Woman, having trouble concentrating on the rug due to the noise of the bombardment, says: "My nerves...! I try, but my nerves...!" (9) The Man responds: "I am ahead of you now...Now, because of your nerves, I must wait." (9) Immediately we recognize the severity of the world the play takes us into: the absurd juxtaposing of domestic labour within a battlefield forces the audience to look at these two activities and consider their relationship. In these first few minutes of the play there are many points which challenge audience assumptions and decoding processes. As the weaving of the rug continues, it is discovered that The Girl is a firm supporter of The Man's efforts to finish the rug despite the siege, "If we stop for the shells, when the siege is over and trade picks up, we shall be short of stock." (9) She argues that it is God's will where the shells fall, and The Woman's nerves can neither encourage nor deflect them. The Boy, like The Woman, is unable to weave; but not for fear of the Christian attackers; he wants to fight for Islam: "I should take a rifle from a dead man and I should - " (9) His protest is cut-off by The Man who maintains that he is allowing the winds of passing struggles to break the family down, and he should learn from his example: "I have not dropped one stitch for fear of history." (10)

On the surface the scene seems like an amplification of domestic strife, but Barker's language and the consequences of the situation soon strike home as The Man and The Boy compare the rug with the rifle:

> THE MAN...all pain will be smothered in the rug. The rug is the rug my father taught me, and his taught him, back to the beginning. All Christians, and all Tartars, and all Kurds, and neither Genghis nor the Tsar have changed its features. In you, boy thirsting for a rifle, the people live, you see the message in the threads.
> THE BOY. I know
> THE MAN. You say you know but you still prefer the rifle.
> THE BOY. Because without the rifle there's no rug! I don't know why, but the rug and the rifle are the same. (10)

This crisis point is significant for many reasons. First, the language and metaphorical quality of what is said enhances the impasse between the two characters. The power of the visual and linguistic poetry enhances the nature of the problem to an extent that denies the possibility of catharsis and should create a genuine moral anxiety in the audience.[116] The expression of the problem is more subversive than if it were presented realistically. Secondly, in addition to its emotional effect, the use of language in this scene ennobles the characters as their clash of wills demonstrates an ability for an individual to strive for self-identification in a historical nightmare. Lastly, the conflict between two traditions, commerce and war, is left entirely unresolved; the audience is obliged to grapple with the

---

[116] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 60.

problem and thus experience it in a more individual way.

The impasse between The Man and The Boy is interrupted by an exploding shell and the spectacle of a dead horse's blood, spreading swiftly across the stage. The tension reaches a new height as the catastrophe of the war raging offstage makes its way onstage in a wave of blood. The Man is even more resolved in his purpose to weave the rug and generate stock: "Stock is all. Stock is life." (11) Despite the fact that shrapnel is now flying around, The Girl is encouraged to keep weaving by thinking about the food they will trade for with the rug. A soldier is shot in the garden outside their house, more blood onstage, The Boy is resolved to take his place because the Christians are taking the city. He is made to keep his place weaving the rug by The Man who says, "If you abandon the fringes we will never do the rug - ." (11) In a desperate attempt to fetch more wool amidst the debris of the battle now raging just outside the household, The Girl falls and the wool becomes soaked with blood.

The Man discovers that the blood has made the wool a beautiful and unusual red, he decides it is a gift from God, and that it will bring more customers, "...they will gasp and say no other weaver has such reds!" (11) The tension increases further as The Man demands that The Boy go to the hospital to fetch blood to dye more wool. The Boy is appalled at what he is asked to do, especially since "the crescent flag is coming down" (11) and it appears that the city has been taken, but he

must not countermand his family's efforts or 'the gift from God'. The audience should feel great anxiety over the decisions being made by these characters. At this point in the play the suspension of moral predictability has been reached; that is, the actions made by the characters are no longer governed by conventional morality. At this point morally wrong actions are passionately performed in pursuit of an instinctual awareness of self. With the action at its maximum pitch of intensity, every character is divided as each member of the audience should be.

The action quickly falls as two Christian soldiers appear. They speak directly to the audience about the atrocities they have seen, as if delivering the subtext of their entrance:

> FIRST SOLDIER. We took the city. And we found our soldiers crucified. Some with no eyes. Some castrated and with their pieces in their mouths.
> SECOND SOLDIER. So now all bestiality is okay. All looting. And all opening of girls also okay. (12)

Coupled with the unlikely speed in which the Christian forces have taken the city, the entrance of the soldiers works against any realistic or historical interpretation of the play. Barker introduces their intentions like an argument, and the audience is left to grapple with their right to act the way they do. With the soldiers' entrance catastrophe infiltrates the domestic space of the household; they murder The Man for the rug in a final clash of wills.

KISS MY HANDS:

In *Kiss My Hands* the wife of a radical activist inadvertently betrays her husband to his murderers, who visit their home at night. She allows them entry when they plead they have a sick comrade with them. Despite the husband's instructions not to open the door to anyone, the Woman heeds their desperate pleas and opens the door. Her mistake leads to his murder.[117] Having lost her husband to the enemy, in a fit of hysteria, the woman attempts to murder her son so that a world capable of such betrayal may not inflict further damage on his innocence. After an excruciatingly long time attempting to smother the life from her child, she overcomes this impulse, and saving the child she decides to trust humanity again claiming: "I will open the door." (16)

Similar to *The Weaver's Ecstasy*, the catastrophe of war invades the domestic space of a family. In this case, however, the intrusion is far more subversive, and the space more serene. Here a household is asleep for the night when a knock at the door brings the Woman; she is cautious with her callers in a manner not uncommon for anybody answering the door at night. In agony over having her trust betrayed, she exclaims: "Oh, Christ make me deaf and you speechless ever more, you have murdered every decent impulse, you have killed all language, you are the terrorists!" (15) Barker draws attention to the importance of language: from the outset, she

---

[117] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 60.

was only able to develop trust with her callers by what they said through the door. They convinced her to believe in them through argument, their friend's life was at stake and "[b]ecause [the Woman] is a human being and not a dog." (15) In the Theatre of Catastrophe language is of utmost importance, as Barker exclaims, "[i]f language is restored to the actor he ruptures the imaginative blockade of the culture."[118] The passage demonstrates the power of language to convey a truthful bond between people, and how it may destroy this bond.

Because the language used in this play is poetic, its emotion affects the spectator subversively. As many actors of Barker's plays have acknowledged, his use of language is intense with feeling, full of colour and pulse.[119] Ian McDiarmid, the original director of The Possibilities and a consummate performer of Barker's work, states that in acting Barker's language

> the form of the speech becomes as important as its content. It is easy and common in a world where suburban 'television' naturalism is frequently taken as an acting norm for words to be robbed of their proper vitality...[Such a technique] aims for an imitation of life, rather than a distillation of it..."[120]

As McDiarmid suggests, Barker's prose attempts to convey a

---

[118] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 12.

[119] Ian McDiarmid, "Howard Barker: A Personal View," Gambit, 41 (London: Calder, 1984): 94.

[120] McDiarmid 95.

concentration of feeling in the actor whose intensity may affect the audience in a similar fashion. The impact of Barker's theatre is emotional, not ideological: "The slogan is always suffocated by the complex beauty of language delivered of its naturalistic bondage."[121]

As the play progresses, the First Terrorist responds to the Woman's protest by assuring her that if their political crusade is successful, "[they] shall bring back good neighbours, then [the Woman]'ll need no [door]bolts." (15) The Husband is dragged on stage, naked and roped and she apologizes to him saying: "I had not killed the instinct of a neighbour". (15) The Woman is at great pains to politically reconcile her impulse to be kind, especially because it is costing her so dearly. In a fit of reaction she twice exclaims: "**Never open a door again.**" (15) She will not listen to the Third Terrorist, who tells her that one day it will be safe to open doors again and that her conviction may cause the genuine to suffer. The Woman demands forgiveness from her husband before he is taken off to be executed. Initially he is preoccupied with the effect her error will have politically: "I want to [forgive you], but - I am dying for your error! And I had such work to do, who will replace me in the village? I might have served so many, and I perish for your error..." (16) The Woman demands that he struggle to forgive, to which he responds with an expression of the theme underlying the ten

---

[121] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 57.

plays of The Possibilities,

> To survive, we must learn everything we had forgotten, and unlearn everything we were taught, and being inhuman, overcome inhumanity. Now, kiss my hands... *(He holds out his roped hands. She kisses them)*. All's well between us, then... (16)

In this passage Barker presents the possibility of redemption in a catastrophic world through the Husband's advice to his wife. But because the Theatre of Catastrophe offers neither advice or instruction, in a fit of remorse and horror that her husband is being taken away to be murdered, the Woman tells the Child to fetch the pillow from his bed and proceeds to suffocate him with it. The stage directions say that "they grapple as if endlessly" (16) and perhaps this action is symbolic of the Woman grappling with her husband's advice. Eventually the Woman abandons her attempt at infanticide, and while embracing her child she countermands logic and declares that she will continue to open the door. While she may be considered insane, because opening the door is what has caused her so much pain, the action of the struggle demonstrates the painful enactment of learning her husband's advice. In a sense, the relationship of the husband and his wife is akin to that of Barker and his audience, he does not expect anyone to listen to his advice rather, like the Woman, they are forced to re-view and re-feel a 'wrong' action, and go to considerable pains to come to their own conclusion. Barker believes that the frustration of the scene should create anxiety in the audience; this, together with the Woman's

struggle for self-consciousness, should rouse the audience's imagination and stay in their memory. As the protagonist reconstructs herself out of her circumstances, so too must the audience.

THE NEED FOR PROSTITUTION IN ADVANCED SOCIETIES:

In *The Need For Prostitution In Advanced Societies*, Barker demonstrates an important tenet of the Theatre of Catastrophe: that imagination is necessary to transcend conventional political argument.

> The dramatist's obligation becomes an obligation not to a political position (the obvious necessity for socialism, etc., the obvious necessity for welfare, change, for kindness, etc.) but to his own imagination. His function becomes not to educate by his superior political knowledge, for who can trust that? but to lead into moral conflict by his superior imagination. He does not tailor his thought to an ideology, but allows it to range freely over a landscape in which he himself should experience insecurity, exposing his own morality, his own politics, to damage on the way.[122]

In this play the dialogue between the Old Woman and her daughter, the Young Woman, is reminiscent of a political debate. However, as it explores the values, desires and personal realm of the two characters, the audience is exposed to an exploration of the human soul rather than a polemic.

As in the last play, language and spectacle are key factors in elevating the play beyond politics. In political debate or in virtually all rational discourse, language is the

---

[122] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 48-9.

system *par excellence* by which meaning is constructed and knowledge communicated.[123] In Barker's case, language is seen to be equally effective as a system by which meaning is dismantled, destabilized, and reconstructed. In *The Need For Prostitution* Barker dismantles and destabilizes conventional views of left-wing political issues by using metaphor. Metaphor is an important aspect of Barker's writing because it is often used to reconstitute reality on stage, rather than simply reflecting it, as is the case with realism. It is important for practitioners of Barker's work to recognize how an audience can use rhetorical devices like metaphor to shape their experience and judgements in the theatre and, perhaps from there, to use such new experiences to inform their view of society.

Metaphor has often been studied as an aspect of the expressive function of language but not until recently has it been considered as one of the essential conditions of speech.[124] Language works by means of transference from one kind of reality to another and thus it is essentially metaphorical. As Madan Sarup has suggested, some people have urged that technical and scientific language should be purged

---

[123] Dorrian Lambley, "In Search of a Radical Discourse for Theatre," New Theatre Quarterly, 29 (February 1992): 38.

[124] Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 52.

of metaphor but, as his book[125] aptly demonstrates, metaphorical expressions are rooted in language itself. Sarup gives the following examples:

> We habitually think of organisations spatially, in terms of up and down. We tend to think of theories as though they were buildings, and so we talk of foundations, frameworks, etc. 'Base' and 'superstructure' are fundamental concepts in Marxism. As Derrida has shown, even philosophy is permeated with metaphor without knowing it.[126]

Metaphor is ubiquitous and ineradicable in our everyday expression, to a point where usage in most cases becomes 'natural' as a means of constructing meaning. But as was previously asserted, Barker's use of language, and in this case metaphor, aims to dismantle meaning for audience reconstruction. In The Possibilities he attempts to subvert the audience's implicit understanding of metaphor in order to unsettle orderly communication. The metaphorical quality of language allows for a proliferation of meaning, and Barker takes full advantage of this, obliging the audience to make creative choices when constructing meaning from his words. Ultimately their imagination should be engaged because understanding a metaphor in this case is a creative endeavour.

The Need For Prostitution begins with the Old Woman reminiscing about her involvement in a violent revolution, where people were "treading through the broken glass of rich men's houses." (19) Her poetic description of the ecstatic

---

[125] Sarup 52.

[126] Sarup 52.

nature of the event is juxtaposed by her revelation that political revolution is more complex than the celebration of a mob "waving corsetry on sticks." (19) A part of the scenario includes some men, who were assumed to be brothers of the revolution, rescuing police files from the flames. At the time, the Old Woman recalls, she realised that social change would be less swift than the brute destruction caused by the mob. When the Young Woman says, "Don't tell me what I never lived through." (19), it appears that the change initially envisioned by the Old Woman's generation has never occurred.

The Young Woman represents the generation which has grown to adulthood since the revolution in a so-called 'Advanced Society'. She is the manifestation of individualism -- be it considered greed or opportunism -- not unlike the men salvaging police files in the Old Woman's description. The conflict between the two women revolves around how each serves the party. The Old Woman, appalled at the misguided decadence of youth attempts to pass on her stories about the birth of the revolution, in order to enlighten the Young Woman about the core impulse behind what has obviously become a corrupt bureaucracy. The Young Woman responds in a mocking tone about the simplistic images of the revolution, found in all the books and films. "The heroes and the heroines. The red sashes and the rifles waving in the air...The grinning face of the dirty worker. Grinning and grinning." (19) The Old Woman counters this arrogance with, "You would travel half Europe

for your underwear!" (19) To which The Young Woman decadently states:

> The party chiefs complain if in the bedroom I am dated by my clothes. They say, don't I deserve the best dressed whores? Am I not a son of the people? You should hear! They talk of fifty years of struggle, and putting their noses to my groin they mutter how my pants redeem all sacrifice ... *(Pause)*. Something like that. I am a graduate and I make it witty.

The audience is presented with a description of each woman's duty to the party. Each is compelling, the integrity of the Old Woman's fight for revolution is measured against the Young Woman's cynical existence as a prostitute, providing living proof of the failure of the Old Woman's ideology. The audience will side with one or the other, or perhaps relate to both views and thus to the complexity of the issue. The conflict illustrates the incapability of political agendas to fathom the complexity of human nature, and in this regard the scene moves between the inner and outer frame of audience experience.

The metaphorical quality of the Young Woman's language subverts audience expectation in that it explores a political argument in sexual terms. What begins as a debate develops into a deeper exploration of human nature because sexuality is aligned with politics. This alignment creates an anxiety within the audience because where cultural expectations (the outer frame) meet the language in the play (the inner frame) there is discord. This activity of poetic language is described by Julia Kristeva as a *signifying practice*:

> I shall call signifying practice the establishment and the countervailing of a sign system. Establishing a sign system calls for the identity of a speaking subject within a social framework, which he recognizes as a basis for the identity. Countervailing the sign system is done by having the subject undergo an unsettling, questionable process; this indirectly challenges the social framework with which he had previously identified, and it thus coincides with times of abrupt changes, renewal, or revolution in society.[127]

Kristeva describes an aspect of the semiotic in poetic language. The perception of uncertainty and the potential for change become apparent as a critical gap emerges between signified, the party chiefs and the political situation of the play, and the signifier, the language used by the Young Woman to describe her relationship to them. Through Barker's use of language, in particular metaphor, the drawbridge between the subject and the sign is raised. The gap which ensues is where conventional meanings are put in doubt.[128]

The Old Woman (and likely many in the audience) is aghast at the Young Woman's 'witty' description of the party chiefs, and their dispute is driven to a more personal level. The Old Woman attacks the Young Woman's cynicism, claiming to be happier and to believe in a righteous cause. The Young Woman wants a justification for the **"Errors"** (19) made in pursuit of this righteous cause. Admitting to have made

---

[127] Leon S. Roudiez, "Introduction," introduction to Julia Kristeva, Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art (London: Blackwell, 1982) 18.

[128] Roudiez 18.

mistakes, The Old Woman is humiliated for her equivocating, as the Young Woman says:

> Sometimes I think the spirits of the executed gather round my bed and whisper as I fornicate, how miniature your errors are, your little errors barely leave a stain! *(Pause)*. Of course, I am jealous of you also. Jealous of your passions. But I hate you for being alive. You should have perished with the others. By your constant alterations you avoided the bullet. You wallow in error. (20)

Still trying to justify her past and convey her perspective, the Old Woman says, "History advances, not as I believed at your age, in straight lines, but in - " (20) and is cut off by the Young Woman's contempt:

> **Zigzags like the seam of a falling stocking.** *(Pause)*. I am dining with a foreign diplomat. I, the daughter of the revolution, lend my body to the corrupt. He will be half-inebriated from the casino and may not penetrate. **Thus our purity may yet be saved.** *(Pause)* I might have been the director of an enterprise, but I saw the whores waiting for the foreigners and my pity ran out to them and I wanted to know their happiness...
> THE OLD WOMAN. Happiness...?
> THE YOUNG WOMAN. It must be happiness! If it is not happiness, why should the daughters of a free society submit? It is happiness, or there has been another error. (20)

The power of the Young Woman's words should be enhanced by audience perception of her world (inner frame) in comparison to their world (outer frame). The Young Woman has won the argument, but is she evil for abusing the Old Woman? Barker suggests,

> It is a simple task to persuade an audience of a character's evil. The important task is to persuade the audience of its potential or actual participation in evil.
> A moral theatre is not one which separates the sheep from

> the goats (the exploited, the exploiter) but accuses the exploited also.[129]

Although the audience may feel sympathy for the Old Woman, they may also recognize that she deserves none.

After the Young Woman leaves, the Old Woman is soon interrupted by the Young Man, who has come looking for the Young Woman. He too is contemptuous of the Old Woman, as he condescendingly tells her to have a brandy, followed closely by accusations that she is prejudice toward the Young Woman's employment: "You make an icon of her fundament, rather as her clients do." (21) Having lost the argument, the Old Woman claims that the younger generation have no soul and murder love with their cynicism. Losing his composure, the Young Man, lists the various acts of cultural eradication committed by the old regime: "...the slaughter of the unnecessary, the suffocation of prejudice and the notional, the extirpation of the ideal and the fanciful..." (21) And working himself into a violent rage, he threatens her life: "To the cellars with this ancient bitch and one shot in the neck...!" (21) The physical assault looms through "a gulf of silence", and then he apologizes and, echoing the false-conciliation of the Young Woman, leaves saying "[t]he young are vile." (21) The final image is of the Old Woman, stunned by her experience. She stoops to pick up the Young Woman's discarded garments, and hangs them up carefully. Stripped bare of her ideology and

---

[129] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 20.

humiliated by her experience, she nevertheless maintains her dignity by continuing to care for the Young Woman. For Barker it is in the nature of this unpredictable and illogical action of love -- in the face of appalling circumstances -- where hope in humanity exists.

REASONS FOR THE FALL OF EMPERORS:

In the next play, *Reasons For The Fall Of Emperors*, the setting is no longer a household, but, as the action takes place in the Emperor Alexander's tent, the setting remains domestically centred. The stage directions state that Alexander should have a "camp bed" and "an OFFICER in attendance." (25) The comfort of this imperial environment is soon broken, however, by the not too distant "[t]errible sounds" (25) of Alexander's soldiers having their throats cut by ambushing Turks.

Alexander longs to experience the calamity of war from which he is insulated by his subjects:

> ALEXANDER. Listen, the enemy are cutting my soldiers' throats.
> OFFICER. It's wolves.
> ALEXANDER. No, the enemy are cutting my soldiers' throats.
> OFFICER. *(Pause)*. Yes, they are. Go to bed, now.
> ALEXANDER. I must listen.
> OFFICER. Why?
> ALEXANDER. I must. (25)

As the play develops the Officer continues to persuade Alexander that he should not pay any attention to the horrors experienced by his soldiers in defence of his empire; in fact,

as shown above, he tries to convince Alexander that the atrocities do not exist, or are not what they seem. A middle-class, western audience would likely relate to the predicament the Emperor finds himself in: a distressing awareness of the war's carnage, while intermediaries dismiss any cause for alarm or responsibility to be taken. A contemporary audience should see the similarity between the Emperor's reaction and their own response to the current civil war raging in the Balkans.

Initially the battle seemed like one more conflict among many throughout the world. Then, in the early weeks of August 1992, increasingly gruesome images of catastrophe flooded television screens and magazine covers. It was a horror brought close to home because of its graphic depiction before an urban backdrop resembling our own city streets. Like Alexander, citizens around the western world received images of the battle's cruelty, and from within the safety of their homes began to feel pity, guilt and fear about humanity's propensity for violence and its relationship to ourselves.[130] As the editorial of the current edition of Time put it, "[h]orrific pictures and eyewitness accounts of barbarism in Bosnia have broken through the West's indifference..."[131] It is this kind of anxiety -- a break

---

[130] J.F.O. McAllister, "Atrocity and Outrage," Time, Vol. 140, No. 7 (August 17, 1992): 16.

[131] McAllister 3.

through of indifference -- that Barker hopes to achieve in the plays of The Possibilities. Our interest in the plight of Alexander is held not so much by the depiction of his world (inner frame), but rather in our necessity to read beyond his battle and into those being fought in our world (outer frame), which is where this play's impact should be felt.

Within the inner frame, the play must affect the audience emotionally with its theatricality, whether the audience relates to Alexander or his subjects, they must be drawn into the experience of the Emperor's world. The play's intensity increases as he is left alone with "the worst sound in the world", (25) coming from his dying forces. The Officer departs for the night, and as he leaves he gives Alexander advice which reminds the audience of another kind of campaign, closer to home and waged by contemporary political leaders: "...sleep, so you look refreshed and then the troops will think, how confident the Emperor is, we must win! Whereas if you seem tired or full of grief, they will attack despondently." (26) Apparently it is in the people's best interest that he does not listen to their cries for help.

Despite the Officer's advice, Alexander is still too preoccupied with the sounds outside his tent. He hears the sound of boots being brushed and demands the brusher enter his tent. The Groom enters with Alexander's boots. The action intensifies as Alexander discovers he is speaking with a peasant, a 'brother' to those being slaughtered beyond the

perimeter of his camp.

> ALEXANDER. How does a peasant sleep?
> GROOM. He sleeps better than the Emperor.
> ALEXANDER. Why, do the sounds of his brothers dying not disturb his rest?
> GROOM. They were born in pain. They slit the throats of oxen. They beat and sometimes kill their wives. They die of famine in filthy huts and fall into machinery. The Turk is swift with the knife, though not as swift as the Bulgarian. As for the cry it's brief. The ox protests as well. Who hears him?
> ALEXANDER. I think of this. I think of the grief in distant villages, the orphans who scour the long white lane...
> GROOM. They say the Emperor is a sensitive man. Some say they've seen him weep in the hospitals.
> ALEXANDER. He does. (26)

Alexander's sensitivity will likely seem familiar to a contemporary western audience. His humanity can be seen as either that of a good-hearted philanthropist or the rhetoric of a liberal politician: "When I hear you little brother, I know I must build more schools. Do you read?" (26) The audience is meant to identify with the Emperor's liberal gestures toward the Groom. His tenderness provides relief within the hostile battle setting; assuming his sensitivity is genuine, and nothing to the contrary has been suggested, he is appealing.

It soon becomes apparent that Alexander's sensitivity may be equated with ignorance, and this could be the reason for his downfall. In the company of the Groom, he undergoes an education concerning the nature of what makes a mature human being, or in this case, an emperor. The process of Alexander's enlightenment is not unlike that told in mythology concerning

the road of ashes, descent, or grief involved in a man's coming of age.[132]

Alexander interrogates the Groom, trying to discover the truth about the population he rules. The Groom describes a horrible life of peasantry, but his devotion to the Emperor is such that he will not associate any of the horror in his life with Alexander's rule. The Groom's devout nature eventually causes Alexander to weep; after a pause of disbelief, the Groom reflects the Emperor's tears and speaks about his own hardship. Having been thoroughly confused by the

---

[132] Poet Robert Bly speaks about many contemporary men as having missed out on such a transition in their transformation from boyhood to manhood. Pressured to be financially successful in our world, most men in their obsession for material gain have not 'handled ashes'. Bly's description of this dilemma reminds us of Alexander:

> The word ashes contains in it a dark feeling for death; ashes when put on the face whiten it as death does. Job covered himself with ashes to say that the earlier comfortable Job was dead; and that the living Job mourned the dead Job. But, for us, how can we get a look at the cinders side of things when the society is determined to create a world of shopping malls and entertainment complexes in which we are made to believe that there is no death, disfigurement, illness, insanity, poverty, lethargy, or misery? Disneyland means "no ashes."

In this passage, Bly describes many people in our society. Like Alexander's world of servants, our culture of convenience coddles and protects us from a vast amount of experience and truth in the world. Barker wants us to consider pursuing a pathway of ashes in order to gain the same self-discovery experienced by Alexander.

Robert Bly, Iron John (Reading: Addison-Westley, 1990) 81.

Emperor's undignified behaviour, the Groom asserts that "it is not good for an emperor to weep in front of a peasant." (27) Alexander counters by saying, "On the contrary, what is your love worth if it attaches itself only to a dummy? **That sound!**" (27) There is an impasse here as the Groom refuses to acknowledge the humane plea in Alexander's remarks, instead he defends the Emperor's right to hear the sound of slaughter:

> It is a good sound, believe me! It is the sound of sacrifice, you should hear it as another hymn to your house, different in tone but not in quality, from the crowd's gasp at your coronation. The Emperor should know the people will go on dying until the villages are dry sticks and the cattle skeletons. The dead only encourage further sacrifice. Along a road of skulls he might dance if he chose to...! (27)

Desperate to recant for the suffering of his people, Alexander vows to revolutionize society:

> I will put an end to slavery. I will abolish feudalism. I will place teachers in every hamlet. I will break the stooping habit and the ingrained servility of serfs. I will run electricity to every hut and create a corps of critics who will yell at every inhumanity! (27)

Ironically, the servant has encouraged the ruler to take every liberty within his power while, riddled with guilt, the ruler is desperate to give it all away.

Alexander's rhetoric fails to appeal to the Groom's sense of justice; after a pause he uncomprehendingly says that he must get back to polishing the Emperor's boots. Unable to absolve his shame and lower his status to the level of the Groom through promises and words, Alexander begins to pursue his goal through action. He demands that the Groom strip him

naked. The Groom obliges and in the process discovers that the Emperor has 'shit himself'. Once again, we find an image reminiscent of the descent into ashes. The focus of the ritual of ashes is the discovery of all of the ugly realities about oneself. In Alexander's case, it is symbolized by his soiled undergarments; we learn that the battle terrorized him so completely that "[he] wept, and [he] shat." (28) When the Emperor is entirely without clothes he is significantly diminished in stature. He stands before the Groom, naked and shivering and says, "You are dressed and I am naked. You are strong and I am weak. You are fine and I am stunted." (28) The Groom is confronted with the Emperor's vulnerability; as he stands before him, Alexander demands he justify his failure to assassinate such a feeble leader. The Groom is speechless. Alexander "looks into him" (28) and having found the strength of the Emperor, he shouts: **"Flog this man! Hey! Flog this Man!"** (28)

Barker completely topples audience expectations, in the action of Alexander demanding the Groom be flogged for "no reason". (28) Audience empathy should have been built to such an extent that sorrow should be felt for the humility experienced by Alexander before the Groom. The Emperor's ensuing contradictory actions, will cause confusion and chaos; from which it is hoped that audience members may re-view and re-feel their response to this 'wrong' action, and Alexander's character generally. Barker postulates that they may be

individually "launched into a consideration of morality, rather than subdued by the solidarities of critical realism."[133]

As the situation of the inner frame is filled with catastrophe, the spectacle caused by the morally-wrong action should begin to make an audience not only reconsider their relationship to what is happening on stage, but to also recognize comparable phenomena in their lives. The audience should begin to question how they choose to identify with characters; how they make meaning from staged situations and translate this inquiry to their real-life experiences of social, political and historical events. The experience of the play, visually and aurally should at once engage the audience's imagination while filling them with anxiety; the combination allowing them to leave the inner frame of the play with that experience and test it against life experience, in the outer frame.

ONLY SOME CAN TAKE THE STRAIN:

As the title of the next play suggests, perhaps *Only Some Can Take The Strain* of such self-discovery in the theatre. In the most accessible and humorous of The Possibilities plays, a vagrant Bookseller laments over the censorship and ignorance which threaten his treasured books, heaped in a handcart before him. He tells us that he is "on

---

[133] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 61.

the embankment," (33) playing the tramp, in order to avoid the attention of both criminals and police: "This way the cart appears to be a cart of junk and not, as it is, a pantechnicon of truth which might lever up the world." (33) His reference to "the usual fumes from the motor cars" (33) places the action in a modern urban centre; perhaps the Embankment on the south shore of the Thames, in London. Following established convention, however, the exact location of the play is up to the audience. The environment is domestic, but there is more than a hint of malice here, evident in the Bookseller's crooning at the traffic which surrounds him: "The ever-increasing torrent of motor cars. Our arteries are clogged with anxiety, our lungs are corroded with fumes. **What a conspiracy and nobody knows except me.**" (33) He speaks of the inherent horror which exists within the urban civilizations constructed by industrialized nations. At this point in the plays of The Possibilities the action will no longer depict catastrophe as it may occur within a wartime setting, rather the next six plays show catastrophe as it occurs within apparently peaceful contexts.

The Bookseller is extremely sensitive to what he perceives as a hostile environment around him. He bewails the pigeons because he believes their excrement is testimonial to their hate of his trade: "Look how populous and base the pigeon is. The more it shits the more certain I become that I am the last disseminator of knowledge." (35) He treats

potential customers with equal contempt:

> THE MAN. *(tentatively)* All right if I -
> BOOKSELLER. Browse, yes, do browse. *(THE MAN examines the books)*. They are closing in on me. They no longer bother to disguise their intentions. I can almost, if I try, I can almost smell the charring of leaves and flesh. But though elimination awaits me with its twisted eye I struggle on. (34)

The Bookseller's intensity is humorous, and though his romantic rhetoric may initially be dismissed as paranoia, he invites curiosity about what motivates his struggle. Perhaps acts of censorship as extreme as those of the Middle Ages exist today? He makes the audience ponder whether his anxiety is justified. He provokes questions of censorship, and this is an issue which will undoubtedly divide the audience.

The Man discovers a title he has been searching for everywhere and enquires its price:

> THE MAN. How much? It has no price.
> THE BOOKSELLER. It has a price.
> THE MAN. Where? *(he turns the book around)*. Is that the price? Is that seriously the price?
> BOOKSELLER. The price is perfectly serious, but are you?
> THE MAN. *(amazed)*. But that is...!
> THE BOOKSELLER. Do you want everybody reading it?
> THE MAN. But -
> BOOKSELLER. Its price is merely the reflection of its power.
> THE MAN. That may be so, but -
> BOOKSELLER. Anyway, I don't want to let it go.
> THE MAN. You don't want to sell the book?
> BOOKSELLER. No.
> THE MAN. But it's on the counter and it's priced -
> THE BOOKSELLER. And you think that's evidence I wish to sell it? It proves nothing. Any day I might regret selling it, and then I should have to track you down. God knows where you might take refuge. In any case, How do you know you will understand it? It may be beyond your comprehension. The book will therefore be wasted. The efforts of the author, the

> printer and the publisher, all wasted. Criminal. No, I have to be sure. (34)

The Bookseller subverts conventional expectations of a business transaction, especially when the proprietor appears to be a transient, desperate for a sale. He is expected to capitalize on a customer's desire for his product. The transaction begins this way, but before long it turns into an exchange of a different sort, a 'hard sell' of the Bookseller's knowledge, a bargain the Man had not expected. In effect, the Bookseller becomes a pedagogue, delivering his ironic sermon on the protection and dissemination of knowledge. The audience discovers that his struggle is for the protection of the thought contained within the books in his cart. Herein lies the paradox of the Bookseller's character: he reveres the knowledge found in his volumes and rails at a world bereft of this enlightenment, but when faced with an opportunity to sell this enlightenment he is reluctant. The audience must decide the source of this reluctance. Does it lie within the Bookseller himself, in that he lacks the trust in humanity which is needed to begin educating his patrons? Or, is his reluctance based on a society which too easily accepts the commodification of the knowledge? The audience must wrestle with these questions.

The play has expanded the issue of censorship to include trust in the public and the commodification of art. In the outer frame an audience of a Barker play should be aware of the relationship which the Theatre of Catastrophe strives

to attain with its public. In Barker's words,

> It is always the case that the audience is willing to know more, and to endure more, than the dramatist or producer trusts it with. The audience has been treated as a child even by the best theatres.[134]

The Theatre of Catastrophe places great trust in the commitment of its audience members. It is a theatre of anti-parable in which the moral is created by the audience and not the playwright, and in this respect the audience plays a vital role in the evolution of Barker's plays in production.[135]

---

[134] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 44.

[135] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 46.

A parable is defined as "A narrative of imagined events used to typify moral or spiritual relations (*the parables of Christ in the Gospels*); allegory."

J.B. Sykes, ed., The Concise Oxford Dictionary (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1982) 741.

While parables can be reduced to allegory, Barker's conception of anti-parable in the Theatre of Catastrophe is much closer to symbol and sign than allegory. Richard Courtney's translation of a tract Goethe's Werke, explains how symbols influence mental operations differently from allegories:

> Symbolisms transform the experience into an idea, and an idea into an image, so that the idea expressed by the image remains always active and unattainable and, even though expressed in all languages, remains inexpressible. Allegory transforms an experience into a concept and a

Each audience member, like each actor, must be an entrusted member of the theatrical process. Barker's writing can take the imagination of his audience to places they may be reluctant to go, the subsequent exposure to "pain and the illegitimate thought"[136] can evoke an active revision of morality in each audience member based on the imaginative journey offered by the play. The actor must find this confidence and trust in each audience member before they can be expected to take the play's journey and test their moral judgement. If this trust is not ensured, prejudice and insensitivity may arise toward the work, and thus censorship. In his relationship to the public, The Bookseller embodies the neurosis and vulnerability of the Theatre of Catastrophe toward its audience.

The Bookseller's treatment of the Man is extreme. After accusing him of being the police and wanting to burn the book, he claims that the Man had eventually wanted to return and burn him. His threats eventually discourage the Man, who leaves while the Bookseller chants: "Damn all oppressors!" (35) When the Woman comes along she is treated to the same

---

> concept into an image, but so that the concept remains always defined and expressible by the image.

Richard Courtney, Drama And Intelligence (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990) 112.

[136] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 46.

contempt as the Man, as the Bookseller is determined to close shop and leave. When she states, "I am impounding the books. I am Miss Leishman from the Ministry of Education," (35) the Bookseller is incredulous and answers, "There is no such thing - " (35) She is truly an official and quickly goes about her business of "sealing [the] stock." (36) The Bookseller's fears have been confirmed, and he is ecstatic:

> BOOKSELLER. I was expecting you! All these years I was expecting you!
> THE WOMAN. This is an official seal. *(She winds it round the cart).*
> BOOKSELLER. **My speech from the pyre!**
> THE WOMAN. Later, someone will give you an inventory.
> BOOKSELLER. The cars go by! The truth is sealed and the cars go by! (36)

The Woman's casual manner is contrasted by the Bookseller's ceremony. His sanity remains in question until the Woman's threat is fully realised in the Bookseller's description of the censor: "They hunted us, and with such human expression. We are out of control when the oppressor has a human face..." (36) Having had his stock sealed, the Bookseller is surprisingly complacent. He is more interested in expressing the truth of the moment, using the knowledge from the impounded books, which is now safe in his head. The futility of the state-sealed merchandise is developed further when the Man returns -- a consumer with a vengeance -- determined to have the "only copy" (36) of the book he had discovered earlier. The Man cuts through the seals with a knife, he plans to capitalise on the book's rarity by photocopying its pages and distributing their contents. The

Bookseller is enraged, he demands the Man atone for his actions: "What do you think knowledge is? Sherbet?...What are you trying to do, wreck people's lives? **Only some can take the strain!**" (37) The Man covers his mouth and says, "Speak and you die." (37) Having been censored by both the Woman and the Man, the reason for the Bookseller's reluctance to trust the public is now clear. Yet, in spite of this hopeless situation, he continues to trust his own convictions, and offers to rendezvous with the Man 'in Zurich, down by the river, under the tree'. The play poses many questions concerning the nature of censorship and its effects on society and the individual.

THE DUMB WOMAN'S ECSTASY:

As in many of the other plays in The Possibilities, *The Dumb Woman's Ecstasy* explores an event which might have happened in history. Essentially these plays are history -- as imagined by Barker. His intention is to show the multiplicity of factors behind historical events, and in this respect, he critiques history, showing the fragility of its forms. In many respects his manner of exploring history is similar to the post-structuralist perspective of Michel Foucault. Briefly, Foucault allows for a interpretational gap to exist between past and present events. He maintains that such gaps should remain unexplained because explanations will lead to singular

historical narratives and evolutionist conclusions.[137]

---

[137] Sarup 64.

Like Barker's view of theatre, Foucault's view of history is against any form of global theorizing. He wants to avoid totalizing forms of analysis and is critical of traditional systems of historical analysis. This is similar to Barker's critical suspicion of realism and clarity in the theatre.

Though Foucault's works do not constitute a system of historical analysis, they are based on a vision he derived from Nietzsche; this is a conception of history called genealogy. Nietzsche's book On the Genealogy of Morals was an important influence upon Foucault's theories. The Book was an effort to delegitimize the present by separating it from the past. This is what Foucault tries to do. Unlike the historian who traces a line of inevitability, Foucault breaks off the past from the present and, by demonstrating the foreignness of the past, relativizes and undercuts the legitimacy of the present.

Foucault rejects the Hegelian teleological model, in which one mode of production flows dialectically out of another, in favour of a Nietzschean tactic of critique through the presentation of *difference*. The Nietzschean historian begins with the present and goes backward in time until a difference is located. Then s/he proceeds forward again, tracing the transformation and taking care to preserve the discontinuities as well as the connections. This is the method used by Foucault. It is similar to Barker's presentation of anti-history in the plays of The Possibilities in the sense that these plays present events which contain historical elements but are presented in a different often imagined context that often resembles the present. The use of anachronism and imagination in Barker's depiction of history helps an audience maintain the gap of interpretation between

Foucault's historiography has been called genealogical analysis, which differs from traditional forms of historical analysis in several ways:

> Whereas traditional or 'total' history inserts events into grand explanatory systems and linear processes, celebrates great moments and individuals and seeks to document a point of origin, genealogical analysis attempts to establish and preserve the singularity of events, turns away from the spectacular in favour of the discredited, the neglected and a whole range of phenomena which have been denied in history...Genealogies focus on local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize and order them in the name of some true knowledge.[138]

The Dumb Woman's Ecstasy shows an historical event in the spirit of Foucault's genealogy. The play focuses on the Torturer who has just obtained employment with a local lord. Looking for lodgings he inadvertently goes to the home of a previous victim, the Woman, who lives with her son, the Youth. The Torturer describes his occupation and the notion of corporal punishment in an interesting mix of past and present:

> I am the torturer from Poland and I have been offered a post at the castle. The new lord said there could be no more torture it was against his conscience and dismissed the old one, who, like me, set off across the country in search of a new post. But after six months, the necessity for torture made itself apparent, as it always does, and

---

past and present envisioned by Foucault. This gap allows an audience to view the decontextualized historical events on stage in a new light because it presents them with a space or disconnection between the past and present which they must interpret or connect for themselves.

[138] Sarup 64.

> execution also could not be done without for long, so it was my luck to knock at his gate when the vacancy existed and the need was obvious to all. (41)

The Torturer's comments about previous employer's references and the interview he has just endured make his occupation appear contemporary. His description of a lord's decision to bring back corporal punishment sounds familiar to current debates concerning the death penalty. Furthermore, this kind of enforced security resembles the kind of tactics used by Margaret Thatcher to restore neo-conservative order in Britain at the time Barker wrote the play. Thatcher's praise of nostalgia for 'Victorian values' on behalf of the British public is symptomatic of the fear and insecurity suggested by the Torturer.[139] He shows a longing for order and simple social conditions which are associated with Thatcherism. This presentation of a feudal torturer and his victims, speaks to an audience about both contemporary and historical events without limiting either to realistic or factual representation.

As the Torturer describes his work to the Youth, he divulges that in his profession he never asks for truth, only confession. Sounding as if he were quoting scripture, he states, "The confession, even if invalid, improves the soul." (44) He rationalizes the harm he inflicts as being equivalent to illness:

---

[139] Lambley 44.

> ...when my victim cries out in despair, 'But I am innocent!' I think, if she were in the throes of illness she would not cry 'I'm innocent,' would she? (44)

The Youth confronts this evasion of responsibility and the Torturer is forced to admit that he might end up a victim of his own philosophy, and that he keeps his eyes open, "no man willingly exposes himself to a disease. And I frequently move on." (44) Beneath the civility of his conversation lies a great deal of animosity towards the Woman and her home. He constantly criticizes its cleanliness and appearance, and behaves as though he may destroy it or its inhabitants at any time.

When the exact nature of the Woman's torture is discovered: she had her tongue cut out for "claim[ing] to know things others didn't" and speaking "in long sentences." (43) The cruelty of the Torturer and the regime he serves is fully realized; this is a place and time where individual knowledge and expression is punished severely. The audience should sympathize with the silence of the Woman and her obvious desire for revenge upon the man who has deprived her of speech. When the Torturer decides to visit the local pub before retiring for the night, the opportunity for murder seems secure. Apparently he likes to "drink deeply before bed" (44) and when he returns from the pub drunk the Youth and his mother will have a good chance to overcome the superior size of their 'prey'. The suspense builds briefly but is quickly ended as the Torturer returns from the pub in seconds, and

according to the Youth, "more vigorous" (44) than when he left. We are taken by surprise and Barker builds on this by toppling our expectations further. The Torturer seizes the Youth "in a cruel embrace" (45) and demands that they dance. Crushing him, the Torturer demands the Youth speak of love, "Oh, speak your heart to me!" (45) as he spins his suffocating body around the room. Having heard the struggle and expecting her son to have fatally stabbed the drunken Torturer, The Woman comes down the stairs with a bucket and mop, hoping to clean up the Torturer's blood. The Torturer sees her and exclaims, "She comes, equipped as I do, at the end of a busy day, to swab the stains away..." (45) The Woman falls to her knees at the spectacle of her son's struggle with the Torturer; he is captivated by her silent pleading:

> She pleads...*(Dumbly, she implores him)*. Silently... How good it is... her fashion... how eloquent her silence is... *(The youth struggles)*. Shh! *(He tightens his grip)*. Oh, this is torture... through all of her hatred she must plead with me...
>
> THE YOUTH. She loves me...!
> THE TORTURER. Yes... she offers herself...! Let me...! Let me...! Who has known pain, know more... and all this suffering's for you... it is a second birth...! *(As* THE WOMAN *acts her agony,* THE TORTURER *throttles* THE YOUTH, *and lets his body slip to the floor. He goes to the table and sits.* THE WOMAN *is still.* THE TORTURER *breathes deep)*. Oh, mother... I confirm you, mother... in your deep fear... I'll be your son, now. I will dig the garden. I'll stay. (45)

Enduring the experience of her son's murder, the Woman is elevated in the eyes of the Torturer; she gains the dignity of a mother in labour at childbirth. The moment of pleading

and pain, seen initially as a horrific and terrifying sequence, is endowed with beauty by the pledge of the Torturer: he sacrifices her son in order that he may replace him. This act of self-determination is also an act of love, possible only through a violent rite of passage. "I'll stay," he says, and it is clear that the travelling Torturer has been reborn in the Woman's household, and thus a part of this domestic realm. The act of sacrifice is representative of the pain borne in a truthful bond between people. Ultimately the play's evocative nature does not prescribe any conclusions, rather the audience is meant to test and re-create their own morality, as have the characters.

SHE SEES THE ARGUMENT BUT:

Barker opposes the depiction of conservative family life and the security of domestically defined relationships in the theatre. His characters re-define personal relationships, often examining the source of their own morals and sexuality. Barker explores the inherent risk of sexuality in *She Sees The Argument But*. His previous works have been criticised for the way in which they explore sexuality through female characters.[140] In this play he addresses this criticism by

---

[140] In her article on the sexual politics of Howard Barker's plays, Ruth Shade writes:

> It seems that Barker needs to reveal the nature of his female characters' sexuality in order to make significant points about women, and he makes a

examining the desire at the root of sexual politics for women in a "democracy" (50) not unfamiliar to the audience.

A Woman has come to see an Official, part bureaucrat and part therapist, about her impulse to wear relatively revealing clothing in public and make "men suffer for [her]." (49) In the society of the play, the notion of 'revealing' women's fashion means a bare ankle; what seems initially to be an extremely puritan policy becomes familiar by the Official's arguments for prohibiting clothing which encourages women to be seen as sexual objects. Such public policy seems repressive since it takes away individual choice over the personal matter of appearance. Furthermore, the rights of women and equality between the sexes are at stake. The notion of a civilized democracy and its ramifications for relations between men and women is questioned. Within the play's 'democracy', equality between the sexes is explored through fashion. Public policy has stipulated that women wear boiler suits in order to

---

> clear division between love and sex. What he doesn't show is arguably as important as what he does....and he doesn't show love. His women don't have sex for love: they have it because they need to feel in touch with themselves. Barker is, therefore, displaying a tendency to use female sexuality as a substitute for, rather than an illustration of, female political power.

Ruth Shade, "All Passion Is A Risk," Gambit, 41 (London: Calder, 1984): 105.

discourage the "positive encouragement to [sexual] criminality" (49). By concealing -- and thus simplifying -- all differences between men and women, it is expected that attitudes would be controlled. Predictably, the practice backfires as sexual impulse between men and women continues; the Official laments: "...we did not succeed with [the boiler suit]. For one thing, girls tightened the seats, or undid buttons far below the needs of ventilation." (49)

The Official's patronizing manner with the Woman has a latent violence as she tries to diminish the Woman's individuality. The woman's attempts to explain her impulse to explore sexual desire within the gaze of strange men is finally met with the Official's comment: "The world goes on, crises occur, we struggle towards the perfection of democracy, and you, a married woman, dangles her ankle on the bus." (50) The Official's need to simplify sexual behaviour into logical political theories is continually frustrated by the Woman's attempts to tell the truth about how she feels. While she is incapable of recognizing the truth of the Woman's experience, the Official can only reply with, "Bewildering honesty!" (50), and then with an eruption of her own denied emotions:

> OFFICIAL. **You deserve every unwelcome attention that you get.**
> WOMAN. Ah...
> OFFICIAL. And I must say, were some monster brought before me on a charge of violation I should say half-guilty, only half! *(Pause)* My feelings. My real feelings have - soaked through...
> WOMAN. Good.
> OFFICIAL. Don't please, carry your enthusiasm for honesty to such inordinate and - (50-51)

Just as the truth of sexual desire has 'soak(ed) through' in an honest confrontation between the Woman and Official, a Man enters. The Woman protests that she will find it difficult to be candid in her discussion of sexuality with a man in the room. As it turns out, he is a model of the Official's logic and, using him as an example, she cruelly plays on the Woman's insecurity:

> **He is a human being just like us.** ***(Pause)***. Such is the scale of your obsession you refuse to believe he can observe you simply as a person. You think, my ankle will prevent him being a **person** and force him to be a **man**. You continually subvert his right to be a simple person, you **oppress him.** ***(Pause)***. But he refuses you. He is free. How peaceful he is. He observes you with a wonderful and objective comradeship. Your ankle is simply an exposed and consequently, somewhat absurd, piece of human flesh. Does he show you his? He also has an ankle. (51)

The Woman responds to the Official's arguments with fear; trying to maintain her honesty, she claims that the Man frightens her more than a violator would. The Official questions the sanity of the Woman and, with cold logic, she attacks her appearance:

> Am I wearing funny heels? Is my clothing so tight I cannot move naturally? Find a mirror, look in it, and ask yourself who's mad. Look in your eyes, which are ringed with soot, and ask yourself who's mad? (52)

The Official's personal attack on the Woman is the culmination of her regime's censorship of truth. As the emotional truth of the Woman's situation cannot be contained within logical argument, this simplified attack is used to humiliate her as a person. This, of course, is a timeless infliction, as many

world leaders have created policy to govern 'simple person(s)' -- as if such a thing exists. Indeed, the Official concludes by making the Woman ashamed of "...things [she] should not be ashamed of..." (52) and with this, Barker reveals a quality behind many models of power designed for societies of 'responsible' citizens.

The Christian God's infinite knowledge, Freud's concept of the super-ego, and Jeremy Bentham's Panopticonal design of eighteenth century prisons and schools,[141] are comparable means of monitoring an individual's unconscious wishes in society. Barker's choice to explore sex as a public dilemma is significant to his theories of audience reception because the issue is located between the discipline of the

---

[141] According to Foucault, towards the end of the eighteenth century Jeremy Bentham created an architectural model for a prison called a Panopticon that has become a model for domination in western societies since that time. In this circular building of cells no prisoner can be certain of not being observed by the central watch-tower, and so the prisoners gradually begin to police their own behaviour.

This new mode of power, which he called panopticism, was used first of all in schools, barracks and hospitals. People learned how to establish dossiers, systems of marking and classifying. Then there was the permanent surveillance of a group of pupils or patients; and at a certain moment in time these methods began to be generalized.

Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish (London: Penguin, 1977) 47.

body and the control of the population.[142] The play obliges an audience to think about the issue individually and as a member of a society.

THE UNFORSEEN CONSEQUENCES OF A PATRIOTIC ACT:

In *The Unforseen Consequences Of A Patriotic Act* Barker continues to explore the private/public issue of sexuality. In this case, sexual desire overthrows culture and history. The play takes place at the country dwelling of Judith, an Israelite, who has retired to this location after slaying Israel's foremost enemy, Holofernes. Before the action begins the characters of Judith and the Servant deliver a direct summary of their historic actions:[143]

---

[142] Sarup 75.

[143] This manner of delivery is reminiscent of that used by the two soldiers, upon their entrance, in *The Weaver's Ecstasy* (12). In both cases Barker appears to be giving the characters who speak these lines a chance to justify their actions in the play. Arguably it is a technique similar to Brecht's *Verfrumdungseffekt*, as it gives the audience information with which they may form arguments for or against these characters. In this respect it alienates the audience emotionally from the action and helps them to make intellectual judgements about the play. The difference between the use of this device in the first instance as compared with its use here is in *The Unforseen Consequences* we are given this information at the beginning, as opposed to near the end in *The Weaver's Ecstasy*. In the first play Barker eases us into his world by still appealing to our sense of logic,

> JUDITH. The Israelites could not overcome their enemy, whose resourcefulness was greater than their power. So they sent me to seduce him, being the most beautiful woman of the time, and simple. I went with a servant to his camp, and seduced him. And while he slept, I cut off his head.
> THE SERVANT. We put the head in a bag. We carried it past the sentries. What's in the bag, they said. The future of Israel, we replied. A week later Judith lost the power of speech.
> JUDITH. For eight months I was dumb.
> THE SERVANT. What a blow this was! Because she was the heroine of Israel and looked so sick. What use is a sick hero? So they sent her to the country, and there she gave birth. And with the child came speech. (55)

A Woman has arrived to bring Judith to the city where she will be a figure of propaganda; the people of Israel are to learn from her example, and worship her heroic act. She has many persuasive arguments. The people should be able to express their gratitude, the child could be a symbol of reconciliation with Holofernes's tribes, and finally, her presence will bolster the pride of the nation. To this Judith and the Servant make glib replies, prompting the woman to lash out at the Servant, "**Must this person be allowed to speak!** *(Pause)*. I'm sorry. I spit. I froth. Forgive me." (56) Her expression of contempt for the Servant is the first personal comment the Woman makes; from underneath her glistening public veneer we see a moment of personal truth.

Having subverted the Woman's diplomatic facade, Barker takes the characters onto a much more personal level. Judith

---

despite the use of spectacle. By the eighth play he gives us logic only to subvert it through spectacle by the end of the play.

describes her experience with Holofernes the night of the murder and, against the Woman's wishes, she and the Servant emphasize the desire between herself and Holofernes:

> THE SERVANT. He looked at her and stood away - when she was naked - stood away -
> THE WOMAN. Do I need to know this...!
> THE SERVANT. They sat naked, and apart. Intolerable, and wonderful! They looked, they drank and ate the sight of one another naked, the air was solid with their stares -
> THE WOMAN. I think, enough, don't you?
> JUDITH. You see, I did desire him. (56)

The Woman is unable to accept the truth of Judith's sacrifice. In her interpretation of Judith's famous 'historical act' there is no room for incongruity or irrational behaviour. It is shortly discovered, there is no reconciling her political ideals with Judith's emotional damage:

> THE WOMAN. You were obsessed. And in my opinion this makes your triumph greater, an epic of will and the supremely patriotic act. Even tragedy. Come to the city and tell this, I'll be by you. *(She smiles)*. Judith... *(She extends a hand)*. My dear... *(Swiftly,* JUDITH *draws a sword and slices off the proffered hand. A scream)*. (57)

Amidst the screaming of the Woman, Judith exclaims, "I cut the loving gesture! I hack the trusted gesture! I betray! I betray!" (57) With this final horrific spectacle an element of war which the victory slogans, newspapers, or history books can never acknowledge is experienced. Victory, surrender, treaties, or any other adjustment made to the body politic can not expiate the personal agony of those who bear the scars on their own bodies and minds.

Barker reveals how the Woman's political debate,

however well reasoned, is ineffectual in its attempts to free Judith from experience born of sexual desire. Barker's expression, "[w]hat is Politics, but the absence of Desire...?"[144] finds theatrical culmination in this play. His impulse to derive dramatic action from feelings instead of ideas is not unique, and the concept is clearly articulated here by Robert Lepage:

> It doesn't matter where you begin. As long as it's not with a theme, but with a sign, a resource... The survival of the artist... that's a theme. If a group of actors get together and discuss, we'll argue. The debate will become very intellectual. And in the end, the piece will be beige, because it depends only on the confrontation of ideas. A resource is something solid. A fried egg for instance. If someone says that he sees in a fried egg something that has died so that someone else can live, I can't argue with that. It's a feeling.[145]

Full of incongruence, shifting identities and unpredictable events, Barker's writing has the disturbing power of a newly-forged myth. Like the creation of a dream or nightmare, he offers a blueprint for phenomena held together by connections which are emotionally powerful but logically inconsistent.[146] Offering a view of life as it is rarely shown, full of risk and feeling, he creates a theatrical frame where each character's pursuit of self-consciousness provokes

---

[144] Howard Barker, The Castle (London: Calder, 1985) 1.

[145] Robert Lapage, "Theatre of The Miraculous," Saturday Night, 32, 9 (January 1989): 42.

[146] David Ian Rabey, "Introduction," Arguments For A Theatre 4.

the audience to do the same.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIEUTENANT AND THE THREE VILLAGE WOMEN:

The Philosophical Lieutenant And The Three Village Women continue Barker's exploration into the triumph of emotion over logic in the pursuit of self-consciousness. The Officer begins with his eyes closed, describing the picture in his head of the three women who have come before him to beg his mercy. His imaginative description of the women is one of understanding and sympathy. Once his eyes are open, however, this sensitivity turns to arrogance, born of logic and military might:

> Do rise, I am the lieutenant of the battery and not a god, though secretly perhaps I think I am a god, for reasons you need not concern yourselves with. *(They rise)*. I have every intention of demolishing the village and all the virgins in the continent and all the petticoats however perfectly embroidered would not stop me but - *(He gestures with his hand)*. Plead. I am not so arrogant as to ban your pleading, notwithstanding it could not move me, not a jot. (61)

Initially, the Officer appears to live in a world constructed through logic, with truth as its ultimate end. His arguments soon prove to be less about truth, however, and more to do with self-aggrandizement:

> So now, by my honesty, I have deprived myself of three satisfactions any normal man would leap at - the satisfaction of showing pity to the weak, the satisfaction of festooning my soul, and the satisfaction of having a child by a woman I shant see again. You see, I am not corrupted by power! I must be a god! (62)

Refusing the Officer's self-proclaimed divinity, the women

take knives from their skirts and rebel:

> FIRST WOMAN. You have more words than us, you will win all of the arguments. We have to save the village and logic's a bastard or we would not be in this war. (62)

The Officer reminds them of the implicit fallacy of their emotional outburst; if they kill him, undoubtedly there will be many more soldiers come to avenge his death. Bewildered as to why they refuse to act on such a truth, the Officer's constructed world of logic crumbles with his body to the stage under the knives of emotional conviction. No sooner does his body hit the ground than the Corporal enters and shoots the women as they run off.

The play subverts audience expectations in several ways. First, by depicting the military as an intellectual oppressor, logic is equated with a violent, physical force. The women's ferocity at once affirms the psychological damage of the Officer's logic, while offering a surprisingly extreme retribution, coming from characters who are initially so passive. The roles of military and civilian are reversed: the one we would expect to be manifestly violent turns out to be latently so, and vice versa for the other. Barker is careful to demonstrate that it is the egotistical intellect of the Officer which drives the women to kill. In this regard, he signals audience attention to the oppression inflicted by logic within our own society: our legal and political systems are both patriarchal, logical constructs which immediately come to mind. At least, Barker wants his audience to take this

argument with them into their outer frame of reference.

Common notions of truth are also subverted. Barker begins the play by presenting an argument, a dialectic, between the Officer and the women -- an accustomed opening for western theatre audiences. As is the case with many of the plays of The Possibilities the logic of this situation is soon undermined by emotional impulse. Barker wants the audience to decide whether logic or emotion or something in between will reveal truth in our lives. For his characters the stakes are high, usually their survival depends on what choice they make. The Theatre of Catastrophe exists to uphold the audience's right of choice. David Ian Rabey:

> [T]he event of theatre might be the surprising confluence of various parties searching for knowledge, in their own ways, on their own terms, and finding themselves empowered to make new imaginative discoveries... Personal knowledge leads to power. But it is not a power to dominate and control others, which stems from personal insecurities. Rather it is the power to direct one's own destiny in the face of pressures to lead a life defined by the well-rutted channels. While the supposed aims of scientific psychology are to 'predict and control human behaviour', the way of the actor aims at self-understanding, which may render the person *less* predictable and controllable by outside forces... The way of the actor adds nothing to our lives. Rather, it *takes away;* blocks, restrictions, fears, boundaries and conventional views of the self and experience.[147]

In *The Philosophical Lieutenant* we see an attempt on Barker's part to place logic in doubt and thereby demolish it as a

---

[147] David Ian Rabey, "Introduction," Arguments For A Theatre 8-9.

habit in his audience. It is hoped that the audience will rise to this challenge and, rushing into the intellectual/emotional vacuum created by the absence of habit, begin a process of rediscovery in their own lives on the shoulders, as it were, of the drama witnessed.[148]

NOT HIM:

Not Him, the last play, culminates a trend begun in *The Unforeseen Consequences* and developed through *The Philosophical Lieutenant*. Barker explores the fundamental trust implicit in sexual love and how it can be twisted to violent ends through war and abuse. For him this is the catastrophe which has seeped within the social psyche and domestic realm of the western world. In this regard it also concludes the gradual shift of the catastrophe of human conflict from outside a domestic space to within. *Not Him* charts the possibilities of malevolence developed in the subconscious of those who have endured the damage of war.

Among the plays this one demands the most interpretation from the audience. A Man returns from war to a Woman, and we assume he is her husband, but the ambiguity of his identity confuses the issue. As with all of the plays of The Possibilities, the characters all have generic identities in order that the audience does not confuse their personae with the ideas presented. As is clear from his use of language

---

[148] Rabey, "Introduction" 9.

throughout, Barker wants to view these plays for their symbolic and metaphorical value. So, here is have a parable about a man returning home, victorious from the battlefield; an occurrence repeated many times over in western history. He is looking for the comforts of the domestic life, a wife, a house, food, etc. On the Woman's side, the play establishes the great desire felt from awaiting his return. The Second Woman, with whom she has been waiting, expresses the Woman's longing: "Oh, this is love! This is hunger! You dare not think, you dare not imagine! All these years and you refused anticipation. Proof itself arouses your suspicion!" (67) Like the audience, the women are trying to prove the man's identity. He offers his spoils from the battle, a bag of the enemy's heads. Describing the battle as "without reason" (68), he tells us that the random nature of the fighting pitted him against heroes and cowards alike. In the bag, he states, are the heads of both, "which from which is now impossible to distinguish." (68) The crude mixture of heads in the bag demonstrates the absurdity of heroes and chivalry on the battlefield. Far from wanting to discuss, let alone glorify, his conquests, the Man seems content to make himself at home, and make love to his wife: "Do I babble? I am full of stories and gloat. Say if I bore you, or if I am too loud. Ask her to leave now I am desperate to talk intimately." (68)

The Man's desperation for the Woman grows, as does hers for him; yet, because identities are still in question,

their desire manifests itself entirely upon physical attraction:

> MAN. ...And now she [the Woman] aches for a man.
> WOMAN. I do ache. And soon I'll show you how, but what became of my husband?
> MAN. I am your husband, and if you raise your veil I'll believe you are my wife. Though I could love you now, veil or not, here on the tiles.
> WOMAN. The more you talk the more I clamour for your body... (68)

Still not believing the Man is her husband, the Woman continues to question the whereabouts of her husband, and this prompts the Man to list the various qualities he possesses which recommend him as her husband:

> Is the sack not full enough? The dead not dead enough? *(He goes to the sack, tips it. Heads spill out)*. I'll hammer bullet cases through the eyes if she requires it, tell her. [He says to the Second Woman]... I come back, not only having saved the village, not only having defended the frontier but crossed it, over mountain ranges where the shepherds have strange eyes, and punish the enemy in their green valleys, burned their churches and their schools, and now the emperor moves the frontier by a dozen miles, what more can a husband do? Lie down, and I will give you children, fill your belly as I tore open other, give you laughing infants as I skewered others, make you a mother here as I ended maternity elsewhere. *(Pause.* THE WOMAN *raises her veil and kisses his mouth)*. (68-9)

As though advertising his worth in an unclassified advertisement, the Man seems to have won the bond he sought with the Woman. The Woman decides she will 'take' the Man but he must do a number of things first: put the heads away, bathe, and finally make love to her in another place. The Man's desire has reached a point where he is lusting after the Woman, and will follow her anywhere, "[t]he meadow if you

want. The barn if you want. The stable by all means." (70) The Woman takes him away, and returns shortly to report to the Second Woman that she is pregnant. The Man's absence is suspicious, and then the Woman describes their act of 'love' and our worst fears are realized: "...the awful cry of disbelief that all men make, and his eyes were searching for their focus..." (70) The Woman has murdered the Man. She tells us, "[h]e thrilled me. Oh, his words of violence, how he thrilled me! And his murders, how they flooded me with desire..." (71) Desire turned to lust finally manifests itself in violence, and the Woman's description of the act seems almost pornographic. Barker's final sketch of catastrophe shows it now residing within the domestic world in the perverted form of sexual murder. The emotions and desires of love, turned to lust and finally violence. He reminds the audience of the many cases of domestic violence existing today, and the audience should leave the play pondering the catastrophe that exists within the domestic world, on television, in their relationships, in their bedroom.

The Possibilities was Barker's first attempt to create the Theatre of Catastrophe on stage. In this series of ten plays his dramatic form aims to create a tension within the audience. He has said these plays reached an apotheosis of suspending moral predictability. By removing the moral climate in the plays he encourages each audience member to redefine his/her own morality. Lacking ideology, and complex in issue

and expression, The Possibilities leaves much interpretation to the individual audience member, whom Barker hopes will have a unique experience of what has happened in the theatre. The beauty of language and image should entice the audience to confront the anxiety which the action is likely to elicit. The transcendence of habit within the theatre is Barker's aim in the written text. The process of how this might be achieved in the performance text will be explored in chapter four.

CHAPTER THREE

A FRAMEWORK FOR POSTMODERN ANALYSIS OF THE LAST SUPPER

> A new theatre will not force anyone to be free. Rather it will be an invitation to ask what freedom is.
>
> Howard Barker.[149]

In The Possibilities audience assumptions about vast topics such as war, history, and relationships are challenged and provocative alternatives are explored. In The Last Supper, Barker invokes critical analysis of western society's reliance on Christian ethics, ideology and myth. The play undermines habitual ways of making moral judgements in our society, and their reflection in our legal, educational and other social systems.[150] An audience member is made critically aware of

---

[149] Howard Barker, Arguments For A Theatre (London: Calder, 1989) 44.

[150] This constitutes a lengthy sociological debate, and this is Barker's intention. He uses Christianity as the basis for this play because it is the dominant western religion, and therefore should be of concern to his audience. The play's premise is less an 'exposure' of the Christian religion than an examination of the constant swing between submission and independence that religion generates. Barker wants the audience to contemplate this tendency in their personal behaviour and in workings of society's institutions.

Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 75.

Christian morality and the effects this has had upon individual thinking. Similar to the play's content, the form Barker establishes also obliges his audience to question and break habitual response patterns. As traditional conventions of morality are broken, so too are traditional means of understanding theatrical experience; no longer may an audience rely upon character, plot, story, or theme to guide them in their interpretation of the play.

The Last Supper begins with two prologues, the first dealing with morality in contemporary society and the second self-referentially addressing Barker's art. They demonstrate that the play is to be seen on the two levels, but more importantly where they intersect. This is remarkably similar to Susan Bennett's model of audience perception. The prologues establish the two main tenets upon which the play will develop dramaturgically between the two theatrical frames. As an introduction, they plant the seed for tensions of expectation in an audience about how these two elements will develop throughout the play and the production; a kind of lattice work of growing opposition, contrasts, and conflicts emerges. Functioning as transitional devices which acclimate the audience to the world of the play, the prologues will be viewed separately from the play's text. Their pedagogical purpose makes them one of the more conventional plot devices used in the play as they constitute epic communication structures. The term *epic*, as contrasted with *dramatic*, has

been defined from a number of differing points of view. In his book The Theory and Analysis of Drama, Manfred Pfister explores epic structure in drama which provides a foundation for discussion of Barker's prologues.

Pfister cites *The Abolition of Finality* as a significant function of a prologue and other disjointed aspects of epic play structure. The theory originated through correspondence between Goethe and Schiller in 1797; it distinguishes the epic quality in a work as the independence of its parts as contrasted with a dramatic quality, which emphasizes finality or the degree to which the parts focus on the ending. According to this view, an epic drama is one in which individual scenes remain relatively independent from each other. In Pfister's words, "the individual scenes and the relationships linking them with each other are more important than the relationships between them and the ending."[151] Also cited by Pfister, and attributed to Goethe and Schiller's theoretical reflections, is the characteristic of epic drama having an episodic structure in which the individual scenes are sharply contrasted with each other. Pfister cites a Brechtian refinement on this concept in his work concerning the aesthetics of reception for an audience, he states:

> the primary function of this type of epic theatre is to undermine the suspense to the extent that the spectators are able to distance themselves

---

[151] Manfred Pfister, The Theory and Analysis of Drama (Cambridge: University Press, 1988) 69.

> critically from the action, thus leaving them free to reflect, compare and evaluate.[152]

Finally, a further Brechtian refinement holds that abolished dramatic finality implies a model of reality that views the ending as something that is open to change.

This is the perspective Barker attempts to create for his audience at the beginning of the play; it is important that a convention be established which invites audience intellectual involvement in the process of the play's production. However, at the same time, it must be clear that the play will not offer what Barker has termed "the autocracy of the author, the Brechtian absolutism."[153] Rather, as is made clear by their content, in addition to alerting a spectator's intellect, the prologues inform the audience that they are going to be left to their own devices. As if to say the play will compel them to discover something the author has not yet discovered himself, Barker suggests: "I no longer wanted to tell the audience anything but to invite their participation in a hunting down of tolerance."[154] David Ian Rabey states:

> Elliot Eisner's distinction between educational objectives is salient here: 'instructional' objectives 'specify skills and information to be learnt'; 'expressive' objectives identify a situation in which audience members 'are to work, a task in which they are to engage: but it does not

---

[152] Pfister 70.

[153] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 16.

[154] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 16.

> specify what they are to learn... An expressive objective provides [both actor and audience member with] an invitation to explore, defer or focus on, issues that are of peculiar interest or import... An expressive objective is evocative rather than prescriptive.[155]

In form, Barker's prologues beckon the audience to the play, and establish a convention of analysis which will soon be subverted. They establish what Pfister calls a mediating communication system in their form of report speech, and then this style of speech not happen again in the play.

The first prologue is performed by Ella, a student, and Dora, a teacher. The duet fashion in which the text is written alongside the teacher/student dynamic of the two characters makes this prologue feel like the enactment of a lesson. Indeed, it is a lesson for the audience, in the manner The Oxford Companion to The Theatre suggests: a 'scurrilous commentary on the politics and social conditions of the day'.[156] In a provocative manner the prologue presents

---

[155] Rabey, "Introduction," Arguments For A Theatre 5-6.

[156] According to The Oxford Companion To The Theatre, a prologue is defined the following way:

> The word prologue comes from the Greek word *prologos*, originally applied to the speech or dialogue which preceded the first entry of the *chorus* in a Greek play, and by extension to an introductory poem or speech which explained or commented on the action which was to follow....At their best the prologue and epilogue were witty and sometimes scurrilous commentaries on the politics and social conditions of the day;...and they were

Barker's view of an important problem concerning morality in our world. The play was written to address a British audience in 1988; the society he holds up for examination is a western, capitalistic democracy not unlike our own. He suggests that the nature of morality in our society is now in the hands of each individual, and this in itself is positive, provided the individual follows a Nietzschean, "self-perfection" path of life.[157] The trouble is that this is not the case, and to continue using Nietzschean terms, the 'will to the system' is greater than the 'will to power' of the individual which creates a lack of integrity within the individual.[158] Barker

---

> often written by outstanding men of the theatre, and spoken by the finest actors of the time.

Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., The Oxford Companion To The Theatre, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 665.

[157] Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (London: Viking Penguin Inc., 1988) 93.

[158] Like Barker, Nietzsche vehemently criticized what he saw as the dysfunction of systems in society. He held that a system is reducible to a set of premises which cannot be questioned within the framework of the system. All assumptions have to be questioned. No one system reveals the entire truth; at best each adopts one point of view or perspective. We must consider many perspectives and not imprison our thought in one system.

This view is echoed by Barker in Arguments For A Theatre when he proposes that the theatre may be an environment where our society may ask the kind of questions alluded to by Nietzsche. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the

postulates that in an anthropocentric democracy, the height of morality will be no better than that of the lowest common denominator because the individual will to self-perfection is lost to the system of social principles imposed on everyone without criticism. Therefore, we recognize that it is not the notion of democracy being questioned rather it is the way it is used in our society. The prologue reflects a morality co-opted in a democratic system which aims at conditioning all citizens in habits of docility and obedience, or, as it is called, adjustment.

The prologue presents a critical -- bordering on cynical -- view of contemporary society, but the provocative way in which this section is expressed offers its ideas, and indeed those of the play, as a challenge to the audience. The prologue takes the form of two cycles, wherein Dora and Ella recite a poetic chant about the absence of a God commanding any moral assent, and therefore he must be present in the actions of the public. After the first cycle, they demand in unison that the audience laugh, **"this is my creation, laugh"**[159], as if to say it has become common to treat matters of morality as absurd, archaic and humorously out of

---

philosophy of Lvov, Barker's protagonist in The Last Supper, greatly resembles that of Nietzsche.

[159] Howard Barker, The Last Supper (London: Calder, 1988) 1. All future citations from the play will be taken from this edition; page numbers will be enclosed within parentheses and inserted within the text.

fashion. The prologue's second cycle is as follows:

> DORA: Did you think I'd died with religion?
> Did you think I would succumb?
> I have endured worse winters
> Under the arches entertained the louse
> ELLA: Quitting the cathedral in the night
> DORA: God the Public needs no house
> ELLA: And the sexually active bishops
> DORA: The theologians with radio technique
> ELLA: The fathers of gifted children
> DORA: The rock musicians with castles
> ELLA: The summer school students in states of undress
> DORA: The carnival organizers
> ELLA: The sweet-natured pickpockets
> DORA: Shop stewards red-eyed in the billiard hall
> ELLA: Popes and Mercenaries all
> DORA: Concurred
> ELLA: The Public
> We
> The Public
> We
> The Public
> Had to be God
> DORA: Since God had to be
> DORA/ELLA: **Applaud you bastards!**
>
> *The terrible sound of laughter.* (1-2)

With the first prologue, Barker establishes that the society of which the audience is a part (the outer frame) no longer has a religion which commands moral consensus. With the death of religion the moral landscape is different, but it still exists, and the public must now navigate a moral doctrine of their own.

Writing about the role of his theatre in relationship to contemporary moral values, Barker has said:

> As long as the moral landscape in which the theatre operated was morally coherent, whether Christian or bourgeois-humanist, the artist's right to exhort, elucidate and educate were unquestioned. The last decade has indicated such a deterioration of the moral consensus that it is now reasonable to ask

> whether even the most cherished statements of moral rectitude command genuine assent...
>
> Traditionally tragedy was a restatement of public morality over the corpse of the transgressing protagonist... But in a theatre of catastrophe there is no restoration of certitudes, and, in a sense more compelling and less manipulated than the epic theatre, it is the audience who are freed into authority... In catastrophe, whose imaginative ambition exposes the reactionary content in the miserableness of everyday life, lies the possibility of reconstruction.[160]

In the second prologue Barker extends an invitation to his audience to explore individual moral authority, and test or reconstruct moral values from the experience of the play. Ivory, an aristocrat, offers us an 'elite' opportunity fostered in the play: the privilege of being free from the 'suffocating' barrage of facts and figures which we endure daily via electronic mass media. The text fully emphasizes his character's aristocratic panache, and Ivory presents us with the challenge of Barker's art. We are assured, that the play will make the most of the theatrical medium, and do what it does best -- make people think. For any kind of entertainment to do this in our society, it is by this criterion alone elite. Ivory promises us that the play will not 'oil' us with humour, nor hold our hand. "When the poetry became easy it also became poor" (2) becomes the bottom line, and from this prologue on, audience members must navigate their own way through the play of 'pain and parable'.

---

[160] Barker, "The Triumph in Defeat," The Guardian 22 August 1988: 34.

Before proceeding to the play text of The Last Supper, one more tool of analysis must be gathered alongside Bennett's two-frame model. In his article entitled "Howard Barker: Paradigm of Postmodernism," Gunther Klotz presents a revolutionary approach to Theatre of Catastrophe plays which he calls "strategies of signification."[161] His dramaturgical approach to the text corresponds perfectly with Bennett's two-frame model of audience reception, and combining the two provides a better understanding of how Barker's aesthetic can reach its full potential in performance. Klotz bases his analysis on two tenets: Barker's past as a playwright of oppositional content, which has been discussed in chapter one, and what he defines as a 'postmodern' playwriting-style. The latter is a response to a western world in a state of cultural postmodernity.[162] According to Klotz, Barker's style is

---

[161] Gunther Klotz, "Howard Barker: Paradigm of Postmodernism," New Theatre Quarterly, No. 25 (February 1991): 24.

[162] Briefly stated, the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity is that the former is a complicit critique of the latter which is a philosophical and socio-economic reality of late capitalism. According to Linda Hutcheon, the complicit nature of the postmodern critique of contemporary cultural phenomena is what confuses the two. Hutcheon says it is important to distinguish the socio-economic and philosophical grounding of postmodernism in postmodernity; not assume an equation of the culture and its ground, as some critics have done. We must allow for postmodernism's contestation and subversion, and if we do not we are

unique, but it can be seen as a part of a trend among theatre practitioners around the world who are experimenting with oppositional form. Klotz cites theatre semiologist Patrice Pavis's recent work on postmodern theatre when he says,

> In contrast to the time spanning both the classical and modern periods, today nobody believes in the specificity of the dramatic text, or in the existence of rules and regulations governing dialogue, character, dramatic structure, etc.[163]

He attributes this revolutionary shift in theatre production to the way in which contemporary practitioners are responding to the world in their art. Klotz grounds the postmodern movement in a historical perspective by describing its evolution from European bourgeois drama, circa 1800:

> In Europe the 'classical' bourgeois drama was one of individual action, caught between freedom and necessity. Its form was strictly closed, stage and

---

forgetting its relationship to modernism. Postmodernism recalls modernism's initial oppositional impulse, both ideological and aesthetic, but it has an equally strong rejection of modernism's founding notion of formalist autonomy. Postmodern drama *must* exist between the two frames, while modernist drama, like naturalism for instance, can exist within the inner frame entirely.

Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989) 23-31.

[163] Klotz 20.

Patrice Pavis, "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," Modern Drama, XXIX, No. 1 (1986): 9.

> audience were separated, the dialogue was central, and the actors identified with their roles. When this drama, born during the renaissance, suffered its first major crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, its conventions crumbled. As it was no longer true in late capitalism that the individual by his will and by his resolution and action could shape his life, one of its basic assumptions was called into question. And with the rise of imperialism, two world wars, depressions, mass unemployment, and all kinds of more recent crises, including the debilitating arms race and now the threat to the environment itself, other assumptions of traditional drama became debateable [sic] or irrelevant, so that different concepts of drama came up or were tried out.[164]

In response to the many 'modernist' kinds of drama which were then pursued -- from the subjective naturalism of the later nineteenth century through the expressionist, epic, absurdist lines, to the varieties of 'alternative' theatre of the 1960s and 1970s -- what we may call postmodernist plays and productions of older plays have recently begun to emerge.

In contrast to some postmodern practitioners who chose to reinterpret or 'deconstruct' classical or modern texts, Howard Barker has created the Theatre of Catastrophe. Klotz briefly illustrates two aspects of Barker's plays which are postmodern. First, that the Theatre of Catastrophe is a pictorial or visual theatre. In this respect it relies chiefly on sequences of pictures, tableaux, and audio-visual images; in so doing it relinquishes traditional elements of drama like plot and character, while playing with conventional notions of time and space. Second, in spite of the fact that these

---

[164] Klotz 20.

pictures are distanced from real-life events and from the traditional forms of their representation, the pictorial theatre may, in the light of the dangers the world now confronts, achieve theatrical creations of real social relevance.[165]

Klotz acknowledges the state of postmodernity in which western societies currently exist:

> an overflow of information, a deluge of signs causing a deprivation of meaning, a textualization and fictionalization of whole areas of social life, a media-mediated appearance of reality which reflects it through unauthentic pictures...[166]

---

[165] Klotz 20-21.

[166] Addressing this situation of postmodernity, Klotz cites three prevailing analytic/artistic approaches which have all failed to adequately deal with the situation. Briefly stated here, the first has an attitude of dogmatic blindness to postmodern trends, seeing it as the deconstruction of the instrumentality of reason and an irrational crisis into which mankind is falling. This approach hopes postmodernism will vanish like a fad. The second accepts the meaninglessness of the media-saturated world, and attempts a playful reproduction of the postmodern visualization and textualization of life. This attitude deliberately affirms the interests of the existing power structures, and thereby does not critique the manipulative agendas which often exist within the postmodernity of mass media. The third response is the most radical, and it wishes to expose the hidden agendas and dominant discourse behind media saturation, seeing this phenomena as a means for the present power structures to remain unchallenged because of the soporific effects of postmodernity on the public.

This reflects a situation where art and literature's claim to truth and human values seem exhausted, and the belief in the constitutive power of imagination is just another delusion. For Klotz, Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe provides the possibility for an effective alternative culture in the environment of postmodernity.

As Barker has attempted to create an art which cannot be domesticated and a theatre against the culture of banality, his plays are uniquely situated to create a complicit critique of postmodernity. Klotz describes three strategies of signification which help to identify how this is done, and their criteria will present a framework for further analysis of The Last Supper.

The first is called the *metafictional or metadramatic strategy*, it offers the possibility of discussing directly the difference between textualization and experience. In The Last Supper Barker presents pictorial theatre that stages its signs -- that is the pictures, scenes, texts, the totality of audio-visual movements -- in their own right. These pictures, experienced in the inner frame, are far removed from reality, or the outer frame, and they reject any singular meaning within the inner frame. Yet between the two frames of audience experience, between the fictionalization of life and life itself, there is an unbearable gap which each audience member must bridge on their own. Utilizing this style of

---

Klotz 21.

signification, Barker is able to show an audience the dismantling of the Christian myth, particularly the urge for power and destruction that are a part of the myth. The play's eight parables are a clear demonstration of this urge for power and destruction, but they expose the audience only to the urge, inducing them to make efforts to discover ways to control these fatal pressures.

The structure of The Last Supper does not admit a signification by argument or by reflecting life in a mirror. The play's picturesque quality comes close to the representation of the audio-visual signs the audience will be familiar with from mass media. The second signification strategy relates to the play's representation of audio-visual signs. This representation does not interpret but rather presents questions. It avails itself of the reception habits engendered by the media, by television, by advertising, by rock videos, by the media news, and so on.[167] Barker structures his pictures in clusters of violence and spectacle. Thus themes assemble in the minds of the audience: the violence of a long-lasting civil war, danger and disruption to the people who live there, military forces attacking culture, menacing secret police, ideologizing cause and effects of worship, the responsibility of the poet and the scholar, the appropriation of history and religion as areas of conflict,

---

[167] Klotz 25.

and the contradictory potential of language[168] and of the arts. In most places the pictures are linked up by means of repetition or contrast and at other times they are strung together in a inconsecutive way, deliberately unrelated, but full of associations. This is another way in which Barker denies the audience any immediate interpretation of the play within the inner frame, obliging them to build up their own meaning on the basis of the accumulated pictures, and then explore the ground -- from their own lives, or the outer frame -- from which the horrors portrayed could be ended.

The third signification strategy involves the Bible. Any text related to an older text carries some meaning. As Klotz suggests,

> [i]t manifests itself in its relation between the phenotext and the text referred to...[this] intertextuality, does not work by *imitatio verterum*, but by holding the old text at a distance, by irony, by deconstruction and subversion - not by appropriating and incorporating the old design but by expropriating and 'excorporating' it.[169]

The new text, the theatre production, is not to be defined by the old text but by its reception by the audience in

---

[168] The realization that the English language is chiefly a language of metaphor and analogy, and secondarily a language of description.

Northrop Frye, "The Bridge of Language," On Education (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990) 153-167.

[169] Klotz 25.

performance. Thus, the story of The Last Supper is represented as the construction of a hegemonic ideological myth, useable for, and at the service of, all kinds of legitimation -- moral, religious, philosophical, social, or whatever an audience member decides. The play moves between the two frames of audience reception in that, by way of its title, the audience is aware from the outset that the images in the inner frame will elicit a radical[170] view of the Bible's 'divine' influence on their lives in the outer frame.

The Last Supper's eight 'titled' parables are interspersed among eight play sequences. Taken as a whole, the play sequences and parables are predicated on certain antecedent information. Briefly told here, the following synopsis of preceding activity is made up of details given away sporadically throughout the text. Seven years ago, in a land crippled by a bloody civil war a famous thinker, named Lvov, gathered around him a devoted following of disciples. These were people for whom the normal state of life was nauseating; they were the mad, the critical, the lawless, and the impatient. The group was devoted to Lvov and his ideas, which they revered as a spiritual belief. As time wore on, the group of disciples -- eventually a core

---

[170] The term 'radical' is being used here in the sense of "avoiding dogmatic and factional associations while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change."

Raymond Williams, Keywords (London: Fontana, 1988) 251.

membership of twelve -- went from a fascination and celebration of Lvov's thought to an obsession with it and finally to a knowledge of the resultant ideas which were better than Lvov himself. Their obsession with Lvov got to the point where they could repeat many, if not all, of the ideas he had expressed. Indeed, some of them surpassed even Lvov in their "Lvovness" (51), the method of the teacher being elaborated upon and surpassed by the student. Lvov and his disciples gradually became aware of this fact. The disciples became contemptuous of Lvov, and of each other. Gone was the fascination with their leader, which had brought them together in the first place. Instead, a dislike for each other's company arose, causing many of them to go their separate ways. Their meetings became very infrequent, and were held without the passion that had once infused their proceedings. This troubled Lvov. He had put a great deal of effort into the creation of the ideas which shaped his persona and the group. He wanted both the persona and the ideas to go down in history. In an effort to substantiate himself with them in some permanent way, Lvov calls his disciples together for one last gathering. The play begins on the day of this gathering.

In the first play sequence Marya, a nurse, Arnold, a salesman, and Ivory, an aristocrat, are the first three disciples to arrive for their last gathering with Lvov. The scene shows us a 'picture' of Lvov asleep on the stage, while the other three wait for him to wake up. Arnold and Marya are

angered by Lvov's sleeping. Two reasons are given for their grievance. First, they are dumbfounded that someone could sleep so soundly in a time of social instability, brought about by the war. Second, they feel insulted that Lvov is sleeping in their presence. Ivory, on the other hand, does not feel this way, and defends the actions of Lvov in the face of the others' criticism.

There are two actions which establish strategies of signification in this play sequence: Marya's castigation of the soldiers and Arnold's tirade about Lvov. Regarding the first, from the top of the scene Barker thrusts his audience into a world of destructive urges. In Marya's case, it is questionable as to whether or not the urge itself is destructive. It is, however, brought on by a destructive source, the waste of human life in the war. As the audience listens to a train engine labouring, about to leave and take more soldiers to the front, Marya is in a state of extreme anxiety, and says, "I'm still insane. Obviously as insane as ever." (3) The train passes, and she screams, "Goodbye you male scum! Goodbye you meat and gristle! *(She bares her breasts...)*." (3) Observing her, Arnold comments that she shouts at all the trains yet at the same time she is unequalled in her efforts to nurture the wounded men at the hospitals. The audience may see Marya's outburst in a number of ways: she is protesting against being overworked and this is her expression of battle fatigue, or perhaps her breasts

are a symbol of nurturing and by calling the soldiers "male scum" her outburst is similar to a militant-feminist protest against war and its destructive capabilities. Her demonstration could be seen as evidence of insanity or it could be taken as a compassionate feeling, expressed at an instinctual level. The audience is compelled to bridge the gap between what this nurse is doing and what they are used to seeing a nurse do in reality.

Arnold is distraught by her behaviour and blames Lvov,

> Now, this is his influence. Isn't it? Your influence? *(The FIGURE is still.)* Pretend to be asleep. But I say it's your influence. **You have no desire to cure anybody.** Sleep on, sleep on. (IVORY *enters.*) **Cunt!** (3)

Arnold is passionate in his chastisement. His language is extreme and non-realistic. The way in which the word "cunt" is used signals that Barker's use of language is non-realistic in this play. This should extend to the scene's action, and thereby the audience's custom of hearing and seeing reality reproduced on stage may begin to be broken, in favour of something more immediate and temporal. Also, Barker's use of strong, expressive language is meant to indicate to the audience that what will be enacted does not follow a norm in creating offensive or empathetic characters; the play is not the reiteration of common knowledge but a dislocation of perceptions. Thereby, an audience's normal criteria of offence

and empathy will be challenged.[171] Barker hopes to create unease in the audience, an unease which is at the opposite pole from apathy, which is felt in a state of entertainment. He explains:

> Drama, [for me], is not life described but life imagined, it is the possibility and not reproduction. The idea of obscenity is related to shame, and shame can be both employed and overcome by the fullest commitment of the actor and writer to the emotion described, its validity and truth, and where this occurs the initial frisson of discomfort experienced by the audience in the presence of an actor arguing the body [that these words imply] is replaced by an awe for the powers of human emotion. In this way the obscenity becomes a ground for moral revaluation.[172]

Arnold has shown compassion for the state of Marya and contempt for the sleeping Lvov. He accuses Lvov of being 'fictive' in pretending to be asleep to which Ivory exclaims that it is well-known that Lvov is fictive. Arnold is extremely agitated from the war, and he cannot understand how

---

[171] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 26-7.

In a paper given at the BBC Seminar on Obscene Language on 14th of June 1988, Barker emphasized that in the Theatre of Catastrophe the habitual criteria of offence and empathy are abolished. His theatre is not meant to be entertaining in the conventional sense of the term, and 'entertainment' is able to operate within a limited - often censored - vocabulary because it operates within a limited range of emotions. His plays try to expose an entire range of emotions, and often attempt to extend them, which entails an obligation to explore, describe and speculate on all areas of human experience.

[172] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 28.

Lvov can sleep: "Sleep is for times of stability. Even gardening has become impossible." (3) It is easy to sympathize with Arnold, a man whose life has been destroyed by the war. Despite the advice of Lvov, he has given up his beloved hobby, "Because it is absurd to plant what will never be allowed to flourish. I know you say plant anyway. Plant, and if it is trodden down, plant again. I have heard him say that." (3) Marya elucidates Lvov's aphorism: "Plant, and even though armies trample fifty gardens one they will miss and there you may shelter." (3) The audience now realizes that the characters are not discussing the loss of a past time but they are metaphorically referring to the loss of a place to live because of the war.

Like a man in need of a pacifier, Arnold screams at Lvov, while the others look on:

> **Wake up you utter cunt....**It just so happens I require your fictiveness. **Cunt, wake up.** *(He stares at the hammock and its occupant. The sound of desolation fills the stage.)* (3)

Thus the play's principal figure has been called fictive. Can the audience believe what they are seeing, or is it fiction? All media is constructed, and therefore it all contains a fictional element. The audience should question both Arnold's and their own reliance on 'fictive' images; in this case, that of a sleeping man before them.

Audience uncertainty about the form of what they are witnessing invokes the third signification strategy. Lvov appears to be the character who will be seen as a parallel to

Christ. So far we have heard one of his aphorisms quoted and, without actually referring to him as a spiritual leader, the image of the other three characters around him suggests as much. It is significant that the Christ-figure, the focus of a play about Christianity, is described as being fictive. In this light, the following of Christ, or Christianity, is depicted as a relationship with the deity largely defined by the individual follower. The final focus of the scene is Arnold's longing for Lvov's fictiveness. Metaphorically he presents an image of longing, not unlike that of most of humanity, for a fictive sign which will give meaning to all others. This is true of many followers of religions, philosophies and even sciences. Such a perspective is similar to one demonstrated by Jacques Derrida, and expanded upon by Madan Sarup:

> Just as Western philosophy has been 'phonocentric', centred on the voice and deeply suspicious of script, so also it has been in a broader sense 'logocentric', committed to a belief in some ultimate 'word', presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience. It has yearned for the sign which will give meaning to all others - the 'transcendental signifier' - and for the anchoring, unquestionable meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (the 'transcendental signified'). Examples of such signs include: God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Self, Matter, etc. Since each of these concepts hopes to found our whole system of thought and language, it must itself be beyond that system. It can not be implicated in the very languages that which it attempts to order and anchor; it must be somehow anterior to these discourses. It must act as a linchpin or fulcrum of a whole thought-system, the sign around which all others revolve. Derrida argues that any such transcendental meaning is a

fiction.[173]

In the first play sequence Barker is challenging the teleology (thinking of things in terms of their orientation to a *telos* or end) by which Christianity is often viewed. By calling Lvov fictive, Arnold makes him seem almost metaphysical; like a unassailable foundation in a system of thought. This is much the same way in which the word of the Bible is viewed in Christianity, as a first principle or unimpeachable ground upon which a whole hierarchy of meanings is constructed. According to Derrida, if we examine such first principles, we can see that they may always be deconstructed. First principles of this kind are commonly defined by what they exclude, by a sort of 'binary opposition'.[174] Barker wants his audience to ponder humanity's urge for a spiritual or philosophical fiction, and the subsequent need to construct a hierarchy of meanings and significance around this urge. Arnold's relationship to the sleeping Lvov establishes Lvov's character as a first principle that may now be deconstructed by the audience.

---

[173] Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 40.

[174] Sarup 40-1.

'Deconstruction' is the name Derrida coined to describe the critical operation by which binary opposition can be partially undermined.

A parable follows the first scene. The parables are a series of eight titled scenes which explore the world in which the play takes place. They have their own unique style and they represent the play's most concrete technique of deconstructing a morality imagined by Lvov. In other words, the moral issues dealt with in the parables obliquely comment upon the philosophy of Lvov conveyed in the play sequences. By definition, a parable is "a narrative of imagined events used to typify moral or spiritual relations *(e.g.: the parables of Christ in the Gospels)*; allegory. Comparison."[175] In order to fully appreciate how these parables work within the play, it is important to give further consideration to Barker's construction of language.

The parables differ from the play sequences in that they present situations in which the audience is directly obliged to test their moral response. Language is significant here because it is the principal means by which an audience makes meaning from the decontextualized situation each parable offers. Part riddle, part allegory, Barker aspires toward a polysemous meaning in the language used in the parables; he creates the potential for multiple discoveries to be made within the same structure of words.[176] In his study of the

---

[175] J.B. Sykes, ed., The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Sixth Edition (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1976) 798.

[176] Northrop Frye describes the 'traditional but still neglected' theory of 'polysemous' meaning the following way:

Bible, The Great Code, Northrop Frye states that polysemous meaning is a feature of all serious writing, and the Bible is a prevalent model for serious writing. He explains that polysemous does not really imply different meanings, in the sense that it is suggesting the chosen meaning of a given passage is purely relative, nor is there any question of a superimposed series of different contents of understanding where one moves from one level to the next. What is implied is a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different senses, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed.[177] Barker's parables offer the kind of 'deeply

---

> The feeling is approximately "there is more to be got out of this," or we may say, of something we particularly admire, that every time we read it we get something new out of it. This "something new" is not necessarily something we have overlooked before, but may come rather from a new context in our experience. The implication is that when we start to read, some kind of dialectical process begins to unfold, so that any given understanding of what we read is one of a series of phases or stages of comprehension.

Northrop Frye, The Great Code (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982) 220.

[177] Frye quotes from Dante concerning the polysemous reading of scripture:

> ...be it known that the work is not simple, but on

serious' writing Frye talks about in the sense that they have meaning literally and allegorically, and so on many levels.

As a part of its polysemous meaning, Barker's language in the parables is also inherently dialectical. It is not dialectical in the sense that it is something reducible to a patented formula, like the thesis-antithesis-synthesis attributed to Hegel's use of this word, and it cannot be anything predictive. Rather, the dialectic in this case is a much more complex operation. In language it is a form of understanding combined with its own otherness or opposite, in a way that negates itself and yet passes through that negation into a new stage, preserving its essence in a broader context, and abandoning the one just completed like the chrysalis of a butterfly or a crustacean's outgrown shell.[178]

Like myth and metaphor of the Bible, as analyzed by Frye,

> the contrary it may be called polysemous, that is to say, "of more senses than one"; for it is one sense we get through the letter, and another we get through which the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the second allegorical or mystic... And although these mystic senses have each their special denominations, they may all in general be called allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical; for *allegory* is derived from *aileon*, in Greek, which means the same as the Latin *alienum* or *diversum*.
>
> Frye, The Great Code 221.

[178] Frye, The Great Code 222.

Barker's parables are meant to invoke this dialectic. An audience or reader creates an interpretation which is then followed by their counter-interpretation and thus the dialectic is dynamic and polysemous. According to Frye, a text is a 'type' of each individual recipient; its anti-type begins in the individual audience member's mind, where it is not a simple reception but the unfolding of a long and complex dialectical process. Barker and Frye both suggest that the great doctrinal structures of the past, the Protestant or Catholic Church for instance, have always tended to make themselves the antitypes of Biblical narrative and imagery, depriving individuals of this experience, which is necessary for a true understanding of the Bible. Such systems of faith, however impressive, can hardly be definitive for the public now because they are so conditioned by the phases of language in their time, whether metonymic or descriptive.

Barker's language in the parables offers the audience the capability to make up their own anti-type. His language tries to establish a polysemous communication with the audience which may provoke them to grapple with a dialectic of faith and doubt in their lives. This approach is the only way to contemporize the faith inherent in Christianity, according to Frye:

> A reconsideration of the Bible can take place only along with, and as a part of, a reconsideration of language, and of all the structures, including the literary ones, that language produces. One would hope that in this context the aim of such a reconsideration would be a more tentative one,

> directed not to a terminus of belief but to the open community of vision, and to the charity that is the informing principle of a still greater community than faith.[179]

It is on this level which Barker hopes to entreat his audience with these parables. The language should free them to think about morality in the play and in their lives outside the structures of the church. Their intended exploration is aided by the polysemous language of the parables, it offers an interpretive freedom to the individual not experienced in the sermons of the church. Barker's parables ask the audience to explore their own dialectic of faith and doubt, morality, and other living phenomena in spirituality too often confined by the "anxiety-structures"[180] of organized religion.

Barker wants his audience to be aware that the characters of the play are offering these enactments. He calls the characters who appear in the parables "The Actors Of The Parables" (vi); in this respect it is clear that the characters of the play sequences should be recognized as enacting them. Beyond this, there is no structural connection between the play and the parables until near the end, when in the sixth parable, the two worlds collide. Entitled *The Fleeting Appearance of an Idealist*, the sixth parable reveals that Lvov has moved away from his sleeping disciples where he encounters characters from the world of the parables. Lvov's

---

[179] Frye, The Great Code 227.

[180] Frye, The Great Code 232.

appearance in the parable is open to speculation, but it appears as if he has embarked upon an introspective journey, deciding whether or not to die. In this regard the parables are reminiscent of his thoughts, ideas and teachings; in which he takes refuge in order to decide his destiny. Beyond this point the division between play sequences and parables dissolves, perhaps paralleling Lvov's decision to die and free his disciples of his waning presence. This study, so far, has uncovered a well-established tendency for Barker to initiate a dramatic form, like the parables, only to turn around and subvert this form and the audience's habitual response to it. Typically, then, once the pattern between play sequences and parables becomes predictable, Barker undermines the convention and dissolves the form.

Three characters are exclusive to the parables; collectively they are called the Macs, who are three soldiers named MacAttlee, McNoy, and McStain. Parables one through five are based on the Macs' journey through a world devastated by the civil war. The first parable, entitled *The Irrepressible Optimism of the Demolition Squad*, is about the Macs; they are the demolition squad mentioned in the title. Throughout the play the Macs are on a mission, to unsling church-bells. The order for this demolition was given by a commander who has long since been dead, but without fail the Macs continue their task out of *habit*. Barker emphasizes the deadening nature of their empty ritual:

> McNOY. The Captain says the bell's our enemy. Seek out the churches, says our officer. He gave eight reasons for the unslinging of bells.
> McSTAIN. The sound of four ton bells crashing to the belfry floor is one nobody expects to hear repeated in his lifetime.
> McNOY. We did however, hear it repeated.
> MacATTLEE. In fact, the sound, for all its uniqueness, became routine.
> McNOY. We suffer from the dim awareness that the future will be worse than the past we swore to extinguish.
> MacATTLEE. We imagine what it is to be happy. But what once made us happy no longer does.
> McSTAIN. We are forced to conclude that happiness, if it exists at all, is continuing to do what we are doing. (4)

The Macs may be compared with any number of marshalling bodies in our society, and, ironically, they regularly claim to be pacifists, "We kill Nobody!" (4) Exactly who this demolition squad represents is up to the audience, but it seems clear that generally they are an armed body of men set about censoring an enemy: "The Captain says the bell's our enemy. Seek out the churches, says our officer. He gave eight reasons for the unslinging of bells." (4) Barker appears to be signalling the audience to evaluate the morality of this absent ruler and the morality examined in the eight parables of the play.

The Macs come across a Little Monk and an Abbott, in a monastery, where they are to unsling bells. The Little Monk discovers that the Macs are pacifists, and taking advantage of this, steals their weapons and physically abuses them. Pacifist soldiers up against a militant monk reverses what the audience might expect in this situation. Allegorically, the

description the Macs give of themselves makes them seem like any contemporary bureaucracy, or any governing order, in a modern democracy. Like government officials after a cabinet shuffle they have little sense of the history to their post:

> LITTLE MONK. You do not kill? But beat? Surely you beat?
> McSTAIN. We have, we have beaten, Haven't we?
> McNOY. I dimly recollect a beating, but that was far from here.
> MacATTLEE. Not far from here. We have merely marched in circles.
> McSTAIN. It was near, rather.
> McNOY. Dim, dim, that memory... (5)

Collectively all they seem to be sure about is their moral slogan 'we kill nobody'. The empty expression of this platitude and their forgetful disorientation make the Macs a much more seditious threat than if they were outwardly violent. Their behaviour begs the question, 'Is ignorance more harmful than violence?'

The Little Monk's initial response to the Macs is habitual and dishonest. He welcomes them to the monastery; he offers them food, drink, hot water and towels. His insincere hospitality is soon revealed however, and for this he asks to be beaten:

> I owe it to my soul to be sincere. I could not care if you were fed or starved. Now I suppose you will beat me, and I deserve to be beaten for not succeeding in loving you. *(He pulls up his habit, revealing his back.)* Beat me, then. But leave the bells. Beat me to death for my sins! (5)

It is not until he realizes that the Macs will not hurt him that he is honest: **"Get away from here. You scum!...Scum! I will thrash you with a branch!** *(He goes to kick MacATTLEE, who*

catches him by the foot.)...(shouting.) Brothers! These soldiers do not kill!" (5) To the Little Monk's screaming, McNoy says, "No, don't scream, tell us about the silent life" (5) The Little Monk's fight for freedom is paradoxical and he has metaphorically overcome traditional Christian doctrine of 'original sin'[181] and appears to be ready to fulfil his destiny without divine help.

Having interpreted the Little Monk's screams as signals of distress rather than a call to arms, the Abbott enters with the same subservient attitude toward the soldiers. Once convinced they are pacifists, he too breaks his habitual response and orders the Little Monk to take their weapons. Fearing they will leave and report the continued existence of the bells to their officer, he asks the soldiers to lock themselves in the crypt. This command comes too late, though, because by this time the Little Monk's temper is out of control and he is thrashing the soldiers with a branch. The Abbott exclaims, "Lie on the floor, or he [Little Monk] will

---

[181] According to Frye,

> The doctrine of "original sin" holds that since the fall of Adam human life has been cursed with a built-in inertia that will forever prevent man from fulfilling his destiny without divine help, and that such help can be described only in terms of the external and the objective.

Frye, The Great Code 232.

kick you. *(They lie down.)* Oh, God! I threatened them with violence and they acted!" (6) Frightened by the responsibility and the freedom this response gives, the Abbott reluctantly allows the Little Monk to beat the soldiers, and then when the Little Monk demands to kill them, the spontaneity is too much for the Abbott to handle. The Abbott restrains the Little Monk, they struggle and in frustration the Little Monk slaps the Abbott's face. Their struggle renders them virtually speechless:

> LITTLE MONK. I **hate you! I hate you!** *(He slaps the* ABBOTT's *face. He stops. They are breathless.)* You see how we...you see how...
>
> *A wind of desolation sweeps the stage.*
>
> ABBOTT. *(to the* SOLDIERS.*)* Go and take the bells down...go and...go and...*(The* SOLDIERS *get up, begin to work.)* (6)

The Abbott and the Monk are unable to handle the freedom they had begun to take for themselves. The first parable seems to ask the audience to consider what effect the traditional doctrine of 'original sin' has had upon revolutionary change in western culture. Has the fall of Adam had a profound effect upon the nerve of western cultures to dynamically grow?[182] Concerning this question Frye has the following to add:

> Man is constantly building anxiety-structures, like geodesic domes, around his social and religious institutions. If Milton's view [found in Paradise Lost] of the Bible as a manifesto of human freedom has anything to be said for it, one would expect it

---

[182] Frye, The Great Code 231-2.

> to written in a language that would smash these structures beyond repair, and let some genuine light and air in. But of course anxiety is very skilful at distorting languages.[183]

The Abbott and Little Monk's loss of speech at the end of the parable suggests that the anxiety of humanity is still distorting the language (and actions) of freedom.

Returning to the central story, Marya, Ivory, and Arnold are still waiting for Lvov to wake up. Marya demonstrates a dependency similar to Arnold's when she says of Lvov, "...did you ever know anyone who slept so much? I am offended by it. I regard it as an unfavourable comment on myself." (6) She and Arnold agree that Lvov is escaping from them into his dreams, "[a]s if what he dreamed were better than what we are." (6) Ivory awaits Lvov's awakening with the others, but with a far more authoritative attitude. He tells the others that "[Lvov] dreams appalling truths" (6) with the air of a close friend, privy to the details of Lvov's dreams. Marya counters Ivory's high-status with a violent tone; she expresses a desire to kick Lvov to make him wake up to the truth of her. Her anger is momentarily deflected, however, from Lvov to a passing train, at which she shouts and bares her breasts. It appears Marya is not ready to show the same candid communication with Lvov that she shares with the soldiers on the train. Lvov is an intimidating fiction for her as well as Arnold.

---

[183] Frye, The Great Code 232.

In this sequence of action the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy continues to build on the dependency shown by the disciples toward the fictive figure of Lvov. Barker exposes Marya's struggle against a destructive dependency on Lvov which can only manifest itself in a violent reactive display. Like Arnold she is incapable of finding the courage to confront this self-destructive urge with constructive action. Furthermore, her ritual of expressing her anger at the trains has become an exercise made hollow by repetition.

The image of Arnold, Marya, and Ivory waiting for Lvov to awaken is that of habit, and its stagnation is reminiscent of the routine of the Macs. The entrance of Susannah makes the inertia of these three all the more evident. Apparently Susannah has been hard at work gathering food, a near impossibility with the war's devastation, and yet she enters with a sack of loaves. She is exceedingly sensitive to the compliments of Ivory:

> IVORY. Susannah, you are the absolute in dedication -
> SUSANNAH. Shut up -
> IVORY. The absolute in concentration -
> SUSANNAH. **Shut up, will you!**
> IVORY. Consideration, solicitation -
> SUSANNAH. *(flinging down the sack, which spill loaves all over the floor).* **Shut up, I said!**
> MARYA. He means to compliment you.
> SUSANNAH. He is ascribing tedious virtues to me. It's his way of belittling somebody. (7)

Ivory tries to maintain his high status by complementing Susannah for her acts of servitude. She lowers his status

however, with a powerful conviction and an acute sense of language:

> SUSANNAH. It is really so depressing, so enervating, that people like you who avoid every shred of responsibility or labour can demean the energy of others -
> IVORY. I am not demeaning -
> SUSANNAH. by applying sarcastic epithets to them such
> as -
> IVORY. I abhor the charge -
> SUSANNAH. trust or honesty or -
> IVORY. Abhor! Abhor!
> SUSANNAH. kindness in order to humiliate me! It is you who are humiliated! You! By idleness! By insolence! You! (7)

Susannah identifies the idleness of the other three disciples in her comments, but she singles out Ivory because in his "ascribing tedious virtues" (7) to her work he elevates himself to a position of judgement over her. He says Susannah has a gift, to which Marya responds, "You call everything a gift in order to spare yourself the tedium of imitating it." (7) Susannah's true gift is an ability to use language to abrogate the audience's normal criteria of offence and empathy.

Through the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy demonstrated by Susannah's attack on Ivory, the audience is exposed to an entirely new perspective of praise. Barker deconstructs the implicit status relationship established between two people by a compliment. This is an important relationship to acknowledge in contemporary western society where praise has become as much of a power lever to a narcissistic culture, or a capitalistic ploy, as any genuine

expression of gratitude. For Ivory, the habit of praise is as detached and insincere as the practised hospitality of the used car salesman, bureaucrat, or convenience store cashier. The absence of sincerity between the disciples indicates the stagnation of moral principles in the world of the play, and should provoke the audience to consider whether this stagnation affects their own lives.

While showing the audience an ulterior motive to praise, Susannah's character also demonstrates an instinctual rage pertaining to her participation in a ritual connected to Lvov. Like Marya, she vents anger concerning her work, gathering the food, but she seems to be incapable of addressing her anger toward its source. She and Marya continue to perform empty rituals due to their dependency on Lvov. Susannah, then, is the fourth disciple to demonstrate a kind of inertia that appears to be preventing her from fulfilling her destiny, or at least accomplishing some peace of mind, without the divine support of Lvov. Looking to the intertextual strategy of signification which holds the Bible and its Christian following at a critical distance, the behaviour Susannah demonstrates is akin to the resentment and fear of the freedom suggested in the Bible. She seems frustrated by her work because her faith is not being rewarded by vision or internal empowerment, only external praise for her labour. As many contemporary Christians have reduced the word of the Bible to a guide of good Samaritan behaviour for

the church's community, the word seems to have lost its imaginative quality and even praise can seem offensive. As Frye asserts, the language used in the Bible is the language of love, "which, as Paul reminds us...is likely to outlast most forms of communication."[184] In the Bible there is the possibility of sexual symbolism inherent in the language that has not been acknowledged by the church. Frye calls the proclaiming rhetoric of the Bible the *kerygma*,

> or a welcoming approaching rhetoric, addressed by a symbolically male God to a symbolically female body of readers. Coming the other way is the body of human imaginative response, as we have it in literature and the arts, where the language is purely imaginative and hence hypothetical. Here the imaginative product seems to be symbolically female, the daughter of a muse. Yet perhaps it is only through the study of works of human imagination that we can make any real contact with the level of vision beyond faith.[185]

Barker seems to be demonstrating that, like many contemporary Christians, Lvov's disciples lack the imaginative vision that may take them beyond their faith and make them strong within themselves. Frye and Barker both believe that the imaginative language of art may represent a significant stage of developing this imaginative vision in the public. Barker wants his audience to see the destructive behaviour of those without this vision, in his presentation of Lvov's disciples thus far.

Arnold and Marya are left on stage with the sleeping Lvov and suddenly "A chorus of figures" (8) appears. The

---

[184] Frye, The Great Code 231.

[185] Frye, The Great Code 232.

Oxford Companion to The Theatre defines chorus:

> Chorus: In Greek drama a group of actors who stand aside from the main action of the play and comments on it, often in general terms.... As in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles; Euripides, whose tragedies are more personal than cosmic, made less use of the traditional chorus, concentrating some of its functions in one person who was much more closely concerned with the fate of the protagonists....
>
> On the Elizabethan stage the chorus was the speaker of an introductory prologue, a legacy from Euripides handed down via the Roman *closet dramas of Seneca*.[186]

---

[186] Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., The Oxford Companion To The Theatre, 4th ed. (Oxford: The Claredon Press, 1983) 153-154.

In addition to this definition of the classical origins of the chorus, Friedrich Schiller gives a definition which distinguishes it as an effective epic plot structure:

> The feature of the chorus that tends to arouse most criticism is the fact that it destroys the dramatic illusion and undermines the power of feeling and emotion, but this is precisely what makes it most commendable: For it is exactly these powerful emotions and the creation of this kind of illusion that the true artist deplores and strives to avoid....

Friedrich Schiller, "On The Use Of Chorus In Tragedy," Dramatic Theory and Criticism, ed., Bernard F. Dukore (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974) 473.

Schiller's definition is useful in that it speaks to the chorus's ability to arouse the audience critically to what is

The Chorus appears eight times throughout the play, which is the same number of parables in the play. This may be significant in that, like the parables, these sequences appear to be direct revelations of Lvov's thought; the parables being his teachings while the passages by the Chorus are like public renderings of his conscience. The choral figures obliquely interact with Lvov and act as a foil to his thought by delivering their antithetical values.

In their first appearance the Chorus divulge the dreams of Lvov to the audience; although Arnold and Marya are both present when the chorus speaks they ignore their

---

before them. Barker, like Schiller and Brecht, do not want the theatre to be an object of emotional desire. Barker wants the balance of emotion and intellect, or a productive state of empathy with stage life.

As Theatre practitioner and educator Augusto Boal has said of Brecht's work, and in this case might just as easily be said of Barker:

> A good empathy does not prevent understanding and, on the contrary needs understanding precisely in order to avoid the spectacle's turning into an emotional orgy and the spectator's purging of his social sin. What Brecht does, emotionally, is to place the emphasis on understanding (enlightenment), on *dianoia*.

Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985) 103.

presence. As Arnold addresses the topic of Lvov's dreams, while Lvov sleeps, the Chorus tells the audience what he is dreaming. The second signification strategy, that of associative and disruptive media imagery, functions to give the audience more than one perspective about Lvov's dreams. The audience is effectively left with the question, 'who do you trust?' Traditionally the Chorus is a respected authority on stage, but here the premise is open to question. By the same token, in the outer frame of the audience's experience, news broadcasting or other 'informative' media is open to the same speculation. The audience is meant to think about what the Chorus offers and through comparison with other sources of information in the play, they make their own decision as to its validity. This can be a form of media-literacy carried between the inner and outer frame of an audience's experience of the play.

The appearance of the Chorus at this point in the play disrupts the intimacy, and possibly sentimental nature, of the moment between Arnold and Lvov. The audience is left wondering what time, place, or world the Chorus come from. If the Chorus represents the public, which one? What political, social, or cultural biases do they have? How does this public measure up to that of the audience, or any public the audience knows of, around the world, or throughout history? Also, what is their relationship to Lvov? The Chorus's presence is disruptive because the audience must place them in context with the rest

of the play.

The Chorus identify themselves as "the father and the mother" (8), "community and family" (8), and "the crowd" (8). They say they play these roles; therefore throughout the play they may be seen as all of these things or, essentially, as society. They profess their awareness of Lvov's dreams and thoughts, although their authoritative perspective should be held up for questioning. Throughout the play their tone becomes progressively impassioned and thus their view more readily lends itself to criticism. At times it appears as though they have an agenda to monitor Lvov's thoughts, and pride themselves in his conflict within them. Often the opinions of the Chorus are seen beside those of Lvov, and thereby their words offer the audience an alternate to Lvov's, as well as critical judgement on him as a character (in contrast with the disciples). Overall, then, Barker does not want the audience to forget that the Chorus has an agenda, and that their view of Lvov should be observed critically.

After the Chorus's first appearance, Lvov awakens to discover the devoted presence of Arnold and Marya. Lvov is disturbed by their insipid loitering and dissatisfaction with life. Like two addicts they are miserable and have nothing to do:

> MARYA. ...Do you think we just sit about waiting for you to -
> LVOV. Yes. *(Pause.)*
> MARYA. Yes, it's true. *(She shrugs.)* It's true! When you are asleep we merely quarrel. (8)

Lvov's criticism causes Arnold and Marya to quarrel; they both try their best to slander each other with argument in order to impress Lvov. Turning to the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy, it can be seen that Barker's writing does not allow signification by argument. So, no matter how well executed their arguments may seem, the confrontation between Marya and Arnold demonstrates the futility of argument in their situation because it is seen to be an obsolete discourse based on shallow ideologies. Barker implies that this is especially true in extreme situations -- like wartime -- when clarity, logic, and consistency of meaning no longer apply. This critique should transcend the inner frame of the play and make the audience consider whether or not the same applies in the outer frame of their experience. Are the manifestations of logic (chiefly argument and politics) becoming outmoded in a world threatened by wars, famine, and environmental disaster? This scene should provoke such a question in the minds of the audience; especially as the characters continue to experience a world made incomprehensible by fourteen years of civil war, and the dialogue turns again and again to quarrelling.

Further evidence of the inadequacy of reason and ideology during the civil war arises with the entrance of an Officer, looking for counsel from Lvov about going to the front lines of battle or not. He demands advice: "**tell me what to do then!**" (9) Lvov remains silent, and he tries to explain:

> It is so very easy to repeat the argument that life should not be taken. I have read the argument and it convinced me every time. And yet I was never convinced... (9)

Lvov's continued silence causes the Officer to leave. From what is known about Lvov thus far, it is not surprising that out of a lack of mutual respect he would not oblige someone who needs to be told what to do. Furthermore, Barker uses the struggle of the Officer to confirm that ideologies only cover up the truth, that institutionalized illusions -- moral, political, or social -- cannot disturb the system of violence. Instinctually the Officer was not convinced by arguments, Lvov wants him to recognize the validity of his confusion, and leave to discover the truth of his own conviction; Barker wants his audience to do the same from their experience of the play.

Sloman's entrance further illustrates the collapse of argument in the pursuit of self-knowledge. Sloman and Susannah are the only disciples who perform the work in preparation for the supper; while Susannah yearns for Lvov's appreciation for her efforts, Sloman wants Lvov to do his share of the work. Sloman takes on the responsibility of hunting down something to eat; as the war has made such prey virtually impossible to come by, Sloman 'bags' a sick dog. Arriving with the dead animal, he attempts to convince Lvov and the others that Lvov should finish preparing the animal. The following is an excerpt from his plea for democracy:

> It is terribly hard to kill a dog. I suffered. Will against horror. Will and more will. *(Pause.)* It is quite right that I who loved dogs should have been sent. Quite right. Am I to skin it also? *(LVOV ignores him.)* Silly question. *(He turns to go, then abruptly flings the sack at* LVOV, *who catches it.)* **You skin it.** *(Pause.)* If this is to be our final dinner I think you should do some of the preparation. Seven years I have known you and never once **I sound like a housewife on the edge of mutiny** not once have you. So you. *(Pause.* LVOV *is still.)*... (9)

Provoked by Lvov's continued silence, he begins criticising his facial expression which to Sloman is a manifestation of Lvov's arrogance. Still getting no reaction from Arnold or Marya, Sloman continues in his attempt to make Lvov to share the work: And there's the knife. *(he chucks a blade to* LVOV. *It falls to the floor.)* I never felt so strongly in my life - never more - democratic. *(He looks to* MARYA.*)* Oh, say you know what I mean! *(Pause. He picks up the blade and takes it from* LVOV.*)* I'll skin it obviously. *(He goes out.)* (9)

Sloman's argument for democracy can be seen as an act of contempt for Lvov, rather than any genuine attempt to empower anybody. This is emphasized in his ad-hominem attack of Lvov's facial expression, and the fact that his intent is eroded by his own weakness to follow through on his demand of Lvov. His scepticism falls on the deaf ears of Marya and Arnold, two disciples infatuated with Lvov. The two parties demonstrate a dialectic of belief which will be seen to arise in the very structure of the play. At this point the weaknesses of belief and repudiation of Lvov are seen to have emerged. Barker shows each view in decay, in hopes that the audience may find an

alternative, or perhaps some combination of the two. Northrop Frye speaks to such a combination:

> We are back here to the contrast between the Tower of Babel, the building of which was accompanied by a confusion of tongues, and the "pure speech" (Zephaniah 3:9) or gift of tongues (Acts 2:4) promised for the new age. There comes a point at which the structure of faith seems to become a part of the Tower of Babel, one of a number of competing and mutually unintelligible assertions with a vague factional basis. This is true whether the structure is founded on belief or a repudiation of all assertive structures as concerned with the unknowable... The mind seems to want to expand, to move from the closed fortresses of believer and sceptic to the community of vision.[187]

Barker and Frye both suggest that faith has its dialectical opposite and must somehow combine with it. Doubt then ceases to be the enemy of faith and becomes its complement, showing that the real enemy of faith is mental insensitivity -- prejudice, ignorance, over-adherence to routine, and lack of an open mind to question. For Barker, "the longing for authority is shown to co-exist with a longing for its obliteration."[188] This is true of the disciples' attitude toward Lvov, and should be a matter of speculation between the audience and the play.

---

[187] Frye, The Great Code 230.

[188] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 48.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE LAST SUPPER: AN INDIVIDUAL'S MEASURE OF MORALITY IN THE THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE

> The individual, with his limits and moderations, forgot himself in the dionysiac vortex and became oblivious to the laws of Apollo. Indiscreet extravagance revealed itself as truth, and contradiction, a delight born of pain, spoke out of the bosom of nature.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche[189]

Having established a postmodern framework of analysis and demonstrated its effects within the first play sequence, the first parable, and the first Chorus appearance, the remainder of The Last Supper will now be examined.

Barker continues to develop an image of infatuation among the disciples in the presence of Lvov. While Arnold and Marya obsessively heed Lvov's every gesture, Susannah enters with a sack of potatoes. Similar to her first entrance, her behaviour is aggressive and she brings a great deal of angst into the setting. This time she also echoes Sloman when she speaks about the 'will' it took to gather the potatoes for the benefit of Lvov's supper. Both she and Sloman belligerently demand Lvov's appreciation for their acts of sacrifice. She spills a pile of potatoes from her sack and announces, "Will.

---

[189] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," Dramatic Theory and Criticism, ed. Bernard F. Dukore. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974) 823.

And more will!" (10) Expecting praise from Lvov, she receives the same expression shown to Sloman: "Do you hate me, Lvov? I do it for you, and your face is. Your frown is. A reproving ditch across your brow. *(She looks at him, closely)* (10) While Sloman wants to be treated equally, Susannah yearns for Lvov's compassion. Lvov gives her the following reply:

> If you love me, should I be surprised that you break with trivial conscience? That is the essence of love. But I kiss you anyway. Stealing from the rich is facile but - *(He dries, shudders.)* (11)

In the middle of an aphorism about theft, Lvov stops his reply; as if paralysed he shudders uncontrollably. He seems to have caught himself in the middle of two routine gestures, taking pity on Susannah and repeating advice. As a fast train approaches, Lvov grabs Susannah, still shuddering, while she looks at him appalled. The image of Lvov's violent reaction to habit is amplified by Marya's routine expression to passing trains.

These actions are examples of expressions that appear to have lost their vitality through repetition. Marya now exposes herself to guns. Lvov catches himself in a rut, giving predictable advice; his response is a horrified shudder. Susannah counters this with an embrace which is an example of another routine -- her dependency on Lvov. The complexity of the stage picture evokes the associative and disruptive signification strategy. Barker seems to be presenting a multiple image of self-expression which undermines the traditional view of this as a healthy outlet; he suggests that

when it becomes routine it ceases to be beneficial.

Judith arrives, and her calculated manner provokes further inquiry into personal expressions which have become routine. Her opening monologue is an address to the others about herself and the latest news of the war. In the same breath, she speaks of a group of soldiers hanged for trying to desert their battalion and of hoarding stockings for her wardrobe. She compares her calculated display to Lvov's behaviour:

> Lvov says, you are afraid of something, or you wouldn't dress so well, don't you, Lvov? Yes, I am afraid. I am afraid of Lvov. And he is vain, God knows, his simplicity is so orchestrated. (12)

Judith describes a world where the only law is survival of the fittest; she does so with such decadence that it appears she has mastered this law. Having just arrived she notices the potatoes brought by Susannah, and says,

> I never thought to see potatoes so - inflexibly potato-like again - who - *(She quickly kneels, picks one up.)* May I keep this? To Plant?...You see I believe in the future. *(She pops it in her bag.)* (12)

Then, after her long address to the group, she confesses, "[a]t least I'm honest. **Ha! I hate that phrase!** *(She takes the potato from her bag.)* Can't wait. *(She bites into it.)*" (12) She excuses this sudden display of greed by calling it honesty. In light of the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy, Judith's behaviour exposes a destructive urge inherent in a decadent display of manners.

As she bites into the potato, the motive behind her

concern for the executed soldiers surfaces; she announces that her husband has been killed in the war. Lvov describes her behaviour as calculated and insincere; that she has made a work of art of announcing her husband's death. Judith agrees: "Yes. You taught me that. You taught me information is nothing and expression, all. You are the actor, and me, the scene shifter, learning from the wings... " (12) It appears that the gospel of Lvov may be interpreted to justify any kind of behaviour Judith desires, no matter how decadent, so long as it is full of expression. An intertextual signification strategy is seen to emerge as she continues to morally justify the misery of her late husband brought on by her duty to Lvov. The audience should be reminded of the numerous historical examples of Christian sects whose interpretations of the Bible caused them to do harm to those outside their circle of faith.

Sloman identifies the potential for harm of Lvov's elite ideals. Having just entered and garnered no attention for his efforts in preparing the dog, he appropriately says, "[i]t is not Lvov's way, is it, to let the weak distract the strong? Lvov surrenders nothing." (13) Lvov claims he cannot be consumed in charity, and Sloman counters saying, "[n]o, nor in skinning dogs. Nor gathering potatoes. or clearing drains when drains are blocked." (13) Lvov denounces Sloman's argument for equality, claiming it arises out resentment and jealousy. For Lvov the natural state of the world is one of

inequality: "Resent the stars if you wish. Or the fact that water runs downhill." (13) Sloman counters by claiming that Lvov is trying to attribute his need for democracy to a flaw in his character. Still carrying the prepared dog on a platter, in the excitement generated by the argument, he aggressively swings around the platter, spilling some of its contents. As Sloman attempts to enlighten the others about how dangerously obsessed they have become with Lvov, all they can do is jeer him about "spilling the dog - ". (14) Finally Ivory admits the group's infatuation:

> No, it's true, it's true, we are all incapable of discernment. It's perfectly true what he says we are infatuated. It's perfectly true we have allowed ourselves to be. It's perfectly true the power of Lvov resides solely in his refusal to apologize. Perfectly, perfectly true and I for one refuse to. I for one. *(Pause.)* (14)

The audience should recognize the value of Sloman's argument. Although once Ivory concedes his point, Sloman ceases his appeal, moving instead to a polite consoling of Judith over her husband's death. In this instance, Sloman defuses any effectiveness his argument might have had in order to be considerate to a disinterested Judith. As a metafictional/metadramatic strategy, the scene demonstrates that even when an argument may surpass its counter-argument, the instability of character may defeat its purpose.

The scene concludes with Marya commenting that Judith's shamelessly elite behaviour is timeless in nature. She states, "Judith you will live for such a long, long

time...Because you are unloving. Unhating. But unloving too. I think you will live to be hundreds!" (14) Lvov explains that it is knowledge she loves, and Judith's reply documents the destructive urge inherent in a thirst for knowledge that denies all else:

> JUDITH. Yes! When the telegram arrived [confirming her husband's death] I was more interested in how I would react than I was in the information itself. For months I had prepared myself, and immediately I threw all his things in two large boxes, and sent the boxes to his mother.
> LVOV. That was good. The things will help his mother to die, whereas they would have only prevented your living. *(Pause. She absorbs this.)*
> JUDITH. Lvov knows...! Lvov has never loved anyone, but he knows!...Lvov, who lived all his life in one place, Lvov knows more, don't you, Lvov? Will you teach us something new tonight? I must know something new... *(The sound of desolation.)* (14)

Judith's thirst for knowledge is a search for the finite. Dismissing the infinite quality of love as unnecessary to her knowledge of Lvov, she is like those determined to amass greater amounts of information, when what she really needs is insight. While her enthusiasm and courage are admirable, she hoards knowledge like stockings, and like her clothing, it bolsters her vanity. Pertaining to the intertextual strategy, Barker suggests that this need to unify phenomena into knowledge or material gains is a flaw in the contemporary Christian church. The urge for this is an indication of the finiteness of the human mind. True spiritual vision seeks complexity, but while the church is dominated by wholly rational perspectives, like Judith's, only deficiently singular vision will be sought.

The second parable, *The Ashamed and the Unashamed* depicts a Child, who is without food and shelter, trying to get into a house, filled with pigs, belonging to an old Widow. The Widow is lured outside of her house by the Child's cries. They both end up stuck in snow, up to their necks. The Child calls for help, the Widow begs her not to; they are discovered by three soldiers -- the Macs. The Widow, afraid of the Macs, surrenders her pigs. She and the Child stay in their holes while the Macs slaughter then eat a pig. When the Macs return, they begin to help the two out of their holes when the sound of bells ringing in the distance transfixes them, and the parable comes to a close.

The parable explores the nature of shame in a world where survival of the fittest is the rule. In such a world shame is only useful if one can use it to survive the attack of a more powerful assailant. This is true, both within the inner frame, or the world of the play, and the outer frame, or the neo-conservative society from which the audience comes to the play. Shame is an important element in the survival of the poor in such societies, and those with financial power and little shame often prosper by these standards. As the Macs have no shame for the Widow and Child in their hole, they do not hesitate in killing and eating the Widow's pigs.

The Child's mouth is referred to repeatedly, sometimes for its appearance and sometimes for other reasons. At first the Widow says the Child will not live to be an adult:

> WIDOW. Your mouth.
> CHILD. What about it.
> WIDOW. Says murder me. (15)

Later, when the Child realizes her only hope of sympathy from the Widow might be to look ashamed, and she tries, but to no avail. Her mouth prevents it:

> CHILD. Just a minute! *(She stops.)* One of us could try to be ashamed. If you like, I will. *(Pause.)*
> WIDOW. You don't look it. It's that mouth again. (15)

The Widow and Child both become stuck in the snow and to the Widow's dismay the Child calls for help. The sound of "**Help! Help!**" coming from the Child's mouth distresses the Widow, who is afraid she will now lose everything to the approaching strangers. She says,

> You had to call help. Now look at us. If I had taken no notice how perfect everything would have been. I know I should never have left the house. One error! That's all it takes! One error and every error follows after! This comes of heeding the human voice...Only pigs are worth replying to. (16)

The Widow's caution over the Child's mouth has turned into a fear of language, from the Child's as well as her own mouth. As the Widow predicted, the Child's mouth figures in the Macs' treatment of her; as MacAttlee extends a hand to help her out of the hole he says, [w]hat a wonderful mouth you've got." (17) The stage directions state that she looks to the Widow apprehensively saying, "[n]o, I think I'll stay in the hole." (17) Later the Child laments, "[m]y mouth could have got me out. My mouth was a rope. Whereas your mouth, pinched purse of a thing, keeps you in..." (17) Once the Macs have eaten, it is

implied that they come back to the Widow and Child wanting sex. As McNoy reaches out to the Child, the Widow tells him he should be ashamed. He nudges MacAttlee to reach for the Widow and she says, "[p]inched purse or not. Now you see that loveliness has nothing to do with anything." (17)

Barker's use of the word mouth evokes Jacques Derrida's theory of the transcendental signifier. As has been established by the signifying strategies used to analyze the text thus far, Barker attempts to subvert an audience's reliance upon logic in perceiving his plays, and ultimately their world. He emulates Derrida's theory of trying to subvert the logocentric theory of the sign, or word. Traditionally, the signifier refers to the signified, that is an acoustic image signifies an ideal concept, both of which are present to consciousness. The signifier 'dog' indicates the idea 'dog'; the real dog, the referent is not present. In Derrida's view the sign marks an absent presence. Rather than present the object a speaker employs the sign; however, the meaning of the sign is always postponed or deferred, for speaker and audience alike. Madan Sarup comments upon Derrida's deferred meaning in words:

> Derrida has developed a concept which he calls 'difference' and which refers to 'to differ' - to be unlike or dissimilar in nature, quality or form - and 'to differ' - to delay, to postpone (the French verb *differer* has both these meanings). Spoken French makes no phonetic distinction between the endings '-ance' and '-ence'; the word registers as *difference*. This undetected difference shows up

only in writing.[190]

For both Derrida and Barker, the concept of writing becomes a challenge to our society's conventional idea of structure; for in its conventional sense, a structure always presumes a centre, a fixed principle, a hierarchy of meaning and a solid foundation; and it is just these notions which the endless differing and deferring of writing throws into question.

In a sense Barker seems to be rediscovering a linguistic and philosophical use of words identified in the theories of Jacques Derrida; Derrida has done the same with the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. In particular, Derrida has adopted Nietzsche's philosophy of reflexivity (a form of self awareness, a turning back on oneself). In language, reflexivity occurs in part due to a critical shift of focus from the individual subject to the text. Thus from Nietzsche to Derrida and now to Barker, the human subject -- traditionally the focus of philosophical thought as the place of experience, morality, choice and will -- is gradually abandoned. This reliance upon text is similar to Northrop Frye's philosophy of language in serious writing, utilized in the first parable. His idea of polysemous meaning in language is similar to Derrida's difference; the two theories establish the primacy of language beyond which there are interpretations

---

[190] Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism (London: harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 48.

and perspectives. Troubled by the fact that people came to a written work bound by their perspective, Nietzsche's way of coping with this was by the strategy of intersubstituting opposites. The idea being that if one is always bound by one's perspective, one can at least deliberately reverse perspectives as often as possible, in the process undoing opposed perspectives, showing that the two terms of an opposition are merely accomplices of each other. In this way Nietzsche problematized, for example, the opposition between 'metaphor' and 'concept', 'body' and 'mind'. Nietzsche's process of undoing opposites is rather like Derrida's undoing them as a part of deconstructive practice; Frye's dialectical aspect of polysemous language which extends toward one's faith; and Barker's use of language which attempts to provoke an audience into new ways of making meaning from their experience of language in the theatre. All of these linguistic philosophies recognize the Nietzschean concept that thought is bound to the rhetorical devices that support it and thereby they attempt to use or better understand language in an attempt to deepen thought.

Barker's language challenges an audience's preconceived structures of meaning, both in their experience of the play, in the inner frame, and in the theatrical event's relationship or effect on their lives, in the outer frame. The child's mouth, with its differing/deferring meanings, challenges the way in which the Widow makes meaning in her

life. The Child's mouth takes on many meanings. It beckons the Widow in the first place, putting her at risk. According to the Widow, it foreshadows the destiny of the Child. It calls for help in the Child's perspective, while in the Widow's opinion it calls for trouble. From the perspective of the Macs, the Child's mouth takes on sexual connotations; its attractive appearance suggests sexual functions. The Child is frightened by this perspective, but later refers to her mouth as a "rope", suggesting another function. The Child claims her mouth could have procured her freedom, while the Widow's, "a pinched purse of a thing", is seen the opposite way because "it keeps [the Widow] in" the hole. Finally, the Macs come back to the holes and all of the perspectives of mouths combine when the Macs help both the Widow and the Child out of their holes. The Widow exclaims, "[p]inched purse or not. Now you see that loveliness has nothing to do with anything." (17) The meaning of the Child's mouth is seen to differ and defer throughout the parable, and then eventually bond with its opposite, showing that the opposition is really its accomplice. Allegorically the same can be said of the Child and the Widow and the ashamed and the unashamed.

In reference to the action of the previous play sequence, it might be said that Judith commands such a high status within the group because she has no shame. Perhaps the parable explores shame and it opposite because it is important to recognize that Judith's character is calculatedly shameless

in manner and dress because she is ashamed. The parable can be seen as Lvov's discourse on her character.

The third play sequence begins with an echo of the differing and deferring of words dealt within the second parable. Gisela enters saying, "Things are becoming worse. Or is that a superficial judgement?" (18) To this, Dora replies, "[t]hey are not getting worse. They are merely becoming different." (18) In this case the word 'worse' implies a fixed principle of meaning, or word signifies a value structure which is as much a reflection of Gisela as it is of the conditions outside. Dora, who at times seems like a parody of a teacher, instructs her to say the subjectively open term 'different'.

The metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy in the third play sequence continues to deal with images that present the spiritually nullifying effects of habit and routine. In this case, images of habit in social interaction are shown to be destructive and disempowering for the disciples. Gisela greets Lvov with a hug and a kiss; while kissing him she makes an "[m]mmm" (18) sound. Judith attacks her for this:

> JUDITH. Why do you always go mmmmm when you kiss someone? What is the mmmmm meant to imply?
> DORA. We all have habits.
> JUDITH. It is so false. It means, if it means anything at all, that you feel it should be a pleasure and it isn't. Is that what it means? If it is a pleasure go mmmmm and mean it, if it isn't, shut up.
> DORA. We all have habits.
> JUDITH. So you said.

> DORA. And that is her habit.
> JUDITH. Well, smash it. Do you desire Lvov? Of course you do. Then say so! (18)

While speaking about the insincerity of habitual interaction, Judith's own insincerity is eventually exposed when Gisela responds saying, "*(turning to* JUDITH.*)* You look more beautiful than you have ever looked. *(*LVOV *bursts out laughing.)* She does! That was not a tactic! She does!" (18) Judith accepts this praise as others begin to comment upon her appearance. She exclaims that she is "impeccably got up. Got up to the zenith!" (18) The hypocrisy of this statement surfaces when Gisela comments, "[w]e have only just arrived and already we are busily flattering Judith. That is how quickly we slip into old habits, wars or no wars." (18) Apparently, for Judith, habitual social interaction should be 'smashed' when it draws attention to someone else; when it is for her benefit, it is permitted. The scene signifies some of the reasons why habitual interaction is perpetrated between people.

While the audience is left to consider the sincerity of Gisela's affection toward Lvov and the others, the question of sincerity also arises with Dora; in this case it is her emulation of Lvov in the role of pedagogue. She speaks with pessimism about the countryside that she and Gisela have just travelled through, and seems to indicate that it is a reflection of the degradation of its people:

> The roads are rivers, so to avoid the roads [the people] drive on the fields, and then the fields become rivers. The abuse! The sullen style of abuse! Even the language is dying. We are coming to

the end. (18)

Dora believes that the war is bringing an end to complexity. As a teacher she holds her students in contempt because of their apparent lack of appreciation for complexity. Barker exposes her destructive urge for power in the following elitist proclamation:

> [Complexity] was the whole point of existence. I was teaching a class in the city, a class which dwindles week by week, and today, no one appeared at all. So I stood at the front and lectured, and I was more articulate than at any other time of my life.
> ARNOLD. It seemed so to you. But who was there to judge?
> DORA. Everything I said was true. Everything, perfectly expressed. (19)

As a disciple of Lvov, Dora is seen to be an academic who believes she has a great deal of knowledge; like Judith she is in love with knowledge. Through Dora, Barker is exposing the audience to the detrimental quality of self-serving knowledge, mastered upon historical precepts, which refuses to accept change in the world because it challenges this knowledge. The audience should recognize this 'professional' arrogance in the behaviour of many as it is often the result of reward and public attention. This arrogance, coupled with their condemnation of change -- which itself becomes a habitual practice -- have helped to ensconce society in the deadening routine Barker holds up for criticism in the play.

In an attempt to escape the repetitive bickering of his disciples, Lvov moves to the front of the stage and summons the Chorus. The Chorus speaks as a kind of refrain to

Lvov's painful cries over the absurdity of the disciples. Their lines are preceded by *"a mass of laughter"* (19), and they begin to recite a verse about "the masses" (19). Assuming that 'the masses' are the same thing as 'the crowd' mentioned in their first appearance, they are speaking about themselves, the public. This passage suggests, then, that the 'masses' and the public are one and the same, and the Chorus is their voice in the play. Along with this link to the masses, the Chorus also seems to be punctuated by masses of laughter. In this appearance they are telling Lvov of their activities; almost teasing him with the details of their exploits. The laughter reinforces the taunting, almost malicious quality the Chorus has begun to assume.

In addition to providing a kind of mocking antithesis of Lvov and his circle of disciples, in their second appearance the Chorus take on new relevance; they provide insight into Lvov's relationship to his disciples, and they put his following in context with respect to society as a whole. In the first instance, the Chorus is seen to have an exclusive relationship with Lvov. They instill doubt in him, somewhat like a conscience or a negative aspect of his spirit. The audience may choose to see them as an aspect of his spirit or psyche, so long as they are seen to represent his doubt. In this respect, the Chorus works in dialectical relation to his faith -- in himself and his ideas, his teachings and his following of disciples. As discussed previously, dialectic in

this case means combining with its own otherness, in a way that negates itself and yet passes through that negation into a new stage, preserving its essence in a broader context, and abandoning the one just completed. Lvov's struggle ultimately goes beyond the limits of this dialectic with the Chorus, and into an infinite identity of word and spirit found in the religious body that arises from his own dead body.[191]

The Chorus prompt the audience to think about society's relationship to radical thinkers and their followings. Michel Foucault argues that the outcast behaviour of a radical like Lvov, reveals even more about mainstream society than it does about life on the margins. In his study of the 'limits' of mainstream society throughout history, Foucault discovered that each society, at any given period, practices certain exclusions, or posits certain limits which invite transgression, thereby creating a 'system of the transgressive'. This system is not entirely defined by the existence of criminals, revolutionaries, mad people, or other abnormal individuals or groups, or even the sum of all these deviant forms. What these elements do indicate is where the limits lie, where the values and the very being of a society are called into question.[192] Lvov's relationship with the

---

[191] Northrop Frye, The Great Code (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982) 223-227.

[192] Foucault was careful not to equate the limits with the division drawn between the normal and the pathological. As

Chorus demonstrates this 'system of the transgressive', and his dialogue with them represents the limit between the Same (their perspective) and the Other (his perspective), revealing a glimpse of the truth of both. Foucault argued that this was true of all societies:

> a society expresses itself positively in the mental illness displayed by its members, whether it places them at the centre of its religious life, as is often the case amongst the primitive peoples, or whether it seeks to expatriate them by situating them outside social life, as does our culture.[193]

The Chorus establish that Lvov exists outside the masses. Foucault suggests that the system of the transgressive which occurs between him and the Chorus might also happen within the head of someone suffering from a mental illness. Barker seems to present this possibility in the character of Lvov. His growing awareness on the limit between the Same and Other in society is akin to an internal spiritual awareness between faith and doubt. The two dialectical struggles faced by Lvov

---

Clare O'Farrell points out, the concept of the normal and the pathological is one that only arose in the eighteenth century. As a consequence Foucault found it more useful to examine why this division took place rather than positing the division itself as a foundation.

Claire O'Farrell, Foucault (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1989) 65-69.

[193] O'Farrell 71.

develop into a broader context of understanding as the audience relates to these limits within themselves and within society.

As the play sequence continues, Anna, the prostitute, enters and her acceptance reinforces the notion that Lvov and his disciples exist on the margins of society. She is like a champion within the group, and she passionately greets every disciple. Meanwhile the audience is told about Lvov's feelings for Anna:

> DORA. ...Lvov wants to believe [that Anna will survive]. It is pure Lvov to want the whore to birth the future, but it isn't true, she will be strangled in a dirty room...
> GISELA. Lvov thinks corruption runs off Anna, like rain off an apple. We all have to believe in Anna's essential cleanliness. It is mandatory. (20)

Anna is the one disciple who does not resort to logic or argument to define her presence. It is as if this alternative approach to life has come as a welcome relief to them all.

Though Anna's more instinctual relationship to the group provides a break from their routine of debate and argument, the moment is short lived as Anna singles out Arnold for making unwanted sexual advances, and this immediately causes an argument of equality within the group. Sloman attacks Lvov, saying that the privileges he enjoys with Anna are unavailable to Arnold because of the inequitable nature of the group. Sloman refers to it as a "gnawing, humiliating absence of equality" (21) while the others attack Sloman, accusing him of jealousy. Through the metafictional/

metadramatic strategy, Barker signifies that as time wears on and the number of disciples grow, the ability within the group to separate argument from rhetorical language and value judgements dissolves. While the other disciples interpret Sloman's plea for equality as nothing but jealousy over Lvov's fine qualities, Lvov humiliates him with rhetoric:

> SLOMAN. I must - in the interest of clarity and truth - which was the first condition of our unity - speak what is to me at least - blindingly self-evident - but unperceived by you - which is that -
> LVOV. You wish me to be inhuman. *(Pause.)*
> SLOMAN. Yes. Obviously.
> LVOV. I am perfectly human. And the perfectly human is as near to inhumanity as you should want. If I have power over Anna, you should be glad.
> SLOMAN. Yes, but -
> LVOV. You are angry that you are not me. Your body and your soul are raw, as if you were inverted and your red insides were smarting in the air.
> SLOMAN. I can't reply to that -
> LVOV. It is the terrible cry of the skinned wolf whose nostrils are brimming with its own blood...
> SLOMAN. I can't reply. I would rather help Susannah - (22)

In this passage Barker demonstrates the destructive capability of metaphor in language. Lvov's ad-hominen attack on Sloman, is not the debate Sloman was looking for when he spoke of clarity and truth at the beginning of the passage. Instead Lvov's response is an exercise in the metaphorical quality of language which is bound to thinking. Whereas Sloman wanted clarity and truth, Lvov utilizes rhetoric to effectively silence Sloman. Lvov's rhetorical tactics should signify that thinking is inseparably bound to the rhetorical devices which support it. Therefore, in the inner frame of an audience's experience of the play, Lvov's destructive use of language

should affect their way of thinking about the characters, especially Sloman. In the outer frame, they should be reminded of the rhetorically shifting texture of language. No matter how 'scientific' a plan of inquiry, its communication to others will always be metaphorical and thereby scientifically tenuous in nature. Since metaphors are essentially 'groundless', mere substitutions of one set of signs for another, language tends to betray its own fictive and arbitrary nature at just those points where it is offering to be most intensively persuasive. Lvov demonstrates this persuasion here, to Sloman's detriment.

A Farmer arrives looking for advice from Lvov, the disciples mock him, but before he can go Gisela takes pity on him and tries to explain why the others are laughing. Her pity is condescending, and to him it becomes worse than the mocking laughter of the others. He slaps Gisela, and this infuriates Lvov who begins to humiliate him verbally. The Farmer begins to leave, but then decides his best defence against Lvov is to wait. The resolute response from the Farmer infuriates Lvov, and at a loss for rhetoric, he physically throws him out.

Lvov returns from dragging off the Farmer and with a "continuous movement he leaps onto a chair" (23) to deliver his only soliloquy in the play, about "losing the knack." (23) The 'knack' Lvov is referring to is like a Nietzschean 'will to power', or the ability to be an individual who seeks self-

perfection,[194] and sets an example to others. He delivers a litany about the dissolving aspects of leadership, within himself personally and in the world generally. He begins with language and, from a brief analysis of his own ability, announces, "Come nearer those at the back! Those at the back file through!" (23) His voice is going and for this reason Lvov instructs his audience to suffocate their neighbour if they dare cough; their coughing robs one of the right to hear. This is a continuation of Nietzschean teaching in that there is a tremendous importance attached to suffering and cruelty -- the negative aspect of overcoming.[195] Having just failed to outwit the Farmer with language, it would appear as though Lvov is referring to more than a loss of volume but also the loss of power in his language.[196]

---

[194] Sarup 98.

[195] Sarup 98.

[196] Northrop Frye speaks about the function of poetic language as being the ability to recreate the word of power; the metaphor that unites the subject and object and flies in the face of a contemporary use of language which implies a rigid separation of subject and object and calls for a descriptive accuracy in the use of words. In a technological world where language is simplified by banal commercialism or its descriptive uses in technology, some words have lost their meaning. God, soul, or spirit mean nothing in a world where words have to be specifically objective if they are to mean anything. Nietzsche's phrase "God is dead", which is summoned in Lvov's reference to dead teachers and poets, is really a specialized linguistic observation extended to other areas.

Lvov claims that all the teachers and poets are dead and instead actors get all the attention: "we praise the actors, the geniuses posing for the cameras, how effortless they are and charming, this never-ageing charm will be the death of us..." (23) Combining the loss of the power of language, Christianity, and contemporary western society's fixation on television personalities, Barker appears to be suggesting T.V. evangelism. Neil Postman's comments about the phenomena of religion on television offers many lucid parallels to what Lvov is referring to here:

> On television, religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; that is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual or moral transcendence. On these shows the preacher is tops. God comes out as second banana.[197]

Lvov is condemning the technology and rhetoric of mass media that has made the people's will to power weak as they have

---

According to Northrop Frye it means essentially that God is dead as the subject of a predicate. That is, if we ask "is there a God?" the answer, if it is in terms of the language we customarily use in, can only be no, because any question beginning with the words "is there" is, so to speak, an ungodly question.

Northrop Frye, "Criticism as Education," On Education (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990) 145-146.

[197] Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves To Death (New York: Penguin, 1975) 117.

become dependent upon actors on television for spiritual fulfilment.

The speech continues to condemn aspects of our contemporary commercial culture. Lvov critiques mass media images and an all-pervasive element of humour that is supposed to keep people soporifically happy, provided they buy products to aid them to this end. Lvov claims that "...only catastrophe can keep us clean." (23) and it becomes readily apparent that his struggle with the disciples (inner frame of audience reception) is an amplification of Barker's bid for the Theatre of Catastrophe to the audience (outer frame). Many aspects make this passage stand out stylistically in the play, as if Barker were imparting supplementary information here. Ironically, the effect is not unlike a commercial announcement for Barker's views, as expressed through Lvov. In this respect, the soliloquy can be seen as an example of the associative and disruptive signification strategy. The ideas Lvov expresses in this passage are those expressed by Barker in articles about the Theatre of Catastrophe,[198] and are echoed in the First and Second Prologues. In the soliloquy's direct, almost metatheatrical style Lvov seems to have jumped out of the world of the play in order to make a speech about

---

[198] Howard Barker, "Radical Elitism in the Theatre," "The Politics Beyond the Politics," "The Consolations of Catastrophe," and "Beauty and Terror in the Theatre of Catastrophe," Arguments For A Theatre (London: Calder, 1989) 29-63.

art, media, and society.

Forjacks and Apollo enter the play; one a scholar, the other a poet, between the two of them they seem to embody two different aspects of Lvov. While Apollo lauds the public myth of Lvov's persona, Forjacks has the tenacious quality of an archivist determined to record every word he says. Forjacks is preparing the Book of Lvov. This book is symbolic of the Bible, and in terms of the intertextual signification strategy, Forjacks's approach to this book ironically undermines the process involved in compiling the text. In the following scene, while all the other disciples are helping in the preparation of the supper, Forjacks takes advantage of everyone else's preoccupation with their duties in order to corner Lvov for details of his book:

> FORJACKS. Lvov, every day I thought of you. Every day, I think. I ran through my little book, the diary that I call the Book of Lvov. Sometimes I read things which either I had copied wrongly, or which entirely contradicted other things. And I felt extremely angry, with myself, at first, and then, with you.
> SLOMAN. Table clothes! *(He flings them out with a crack. Activity.)*
> FORJACKS. For example, the concepts of gratification and abstinence.
> SUSANNAH. Thirteen places!
> SLOMAN. Thirteen chairs!....*(*PEOPLE *carry in chairs of odd kinds.)*
> FORJACKS. In June you said - *(He thumbs through a filthy book.)*
> ANNA. Chair!
> FORJACKS. Shh! *(He thumbs.)* In June you said - yes - Tolerance is impossible without gratification - though you later - not just later, often - questioned the value of tolerance - but then in September - **Please don't deliberately knock into me** - sorry - in September - here it is - the 12th - and I may have got this wrong - you say - the

> knowledge of lack, when fulfilment is still possible - an orchard which a man chooses not to trespass in - produces a state of imaginative intensity which reality fails to satisfy, at least only in recollection, so that - what that suggests to me is the essential failure of all moments of consumption, but isn't that opposed to the first proposition, or am I - *(Pause.* LVOV *doesn't respond.)* Please don't bang me with that chair! *(Pause.)* I suppose I am trying to be consistent which in itself is - *(Pause.)* Yes - that's the point, isn't it - as you said in April, the very attempt to inflict symmetrical systems is an oppression - **Anna!** *(She laughs.)*... (25-26)

Assuming the Book of Lvov is symbolic of the Bible, this scene subverts traditional notions of theology. Moreover, Forjacks's aggressive pursuit of details invites the metafictional/ metadramatic signification strategy because of the destructive urge he demonstrates in compiling the book's contents.

Forjacks's penchant for description makes Lvov want to avoid him, and the rest of the disciples appear to resent him also, avoiding work in favour of **his** book. His intense character is designed to make the audience think twice about the process of who constructs our history, our scriptures and with what personal agendas:

> FORJACKS....*(He grins nervously.)* The traffic is impossible! And the refugees! How easily they die! But always in the most inconvenient positions, a plane had strafed a column of - *(He stops.)* That's odd... *(Pause.)*
> I was about to describe in graphic detail something that I thought appalled me, but actually - *(Pause.)* I wanted to entertain you - *(Pause.)* We do love this war, don't we? We do love suffering... (24)

Considering the intertextual signification strategy, apparently Barker wants the audience to consider the question of whether or not those who recorded Biblical texts might have

been susceptible to the same sensationalism which permeates modern media.

While Forjacks is the hated reporter of information concerning Lvov, Apollo is like another media figure. He is Lvov's peer as a poet and thereby given exclusive licence to speak about Lvov's emotional and creative mood. As a poet, it appears as though he helps to manifest Lvov's public image. Lvov admires the poetic ability of Apollo, although he condescendingly describes his poetry by saying, "with a clumsy finger round a pencil stub, wrote poems small and shining like impecunious stars." (24) In contrast to Forjacks, Apollo goes out of his way to be liked by the others, and with good results, according to Dora: "Lvov adores Apollo. Anna adores Apollo. And I must admit, I adore him, too..." (24) Apollo goes out of his way to please and cater to the others, especially Lvov:

> APOLLO....It is wonderful to see us all again! Conventional sentiment, but it is, it is! Sometimes we must give vent to common sentiments, we must endow the truism with life, Lvov, are you in pain? *(He goes to* LVOV, *holds him.)* Before you, I could not understand why I ached even as I laughed, I could not understand the cruelty which flowed over my lip even in the midst of my condolences, nor the brevity of kindness...are you in pain? *(Pause.* SUSANNAH *enters, bearing a table.)* Let me carry a table! Brute to bear the tables! Brute! *(*SLOMAN *follows her in, with a table.)*
> SLOMAN. She isn't weak!
> APOLLO. I merely demonstrate the absurdity of the convention... (25)

Though Apollo is often the one to lighten the mood amongst the disciples, his destructive urge is described by Lvov the

following way: "No one admires you. They think you sycophantic and absurd." (37) Lvov claims that Apollo has merely learned the "art of the parrot" (37) and become good imitation, not a poet in his own right. This candid attack comes after Apollo inadvertently turns praise for Lvov into praise for himself, and first Forjacks and then Lvov attack him for this:

> *(Pause. Then* APOLLO *occupies the silence.)*
> APOLLO....*(Suddenly he kneels to* LVOV.*)* Master! Master! The pleasure it gives to call him **Master!** *(He hangs his head penitently.)* I come to you because you will not ridicule the hunger that I feel for the woman on the corner of the avenue whose skirt lies flat over her belly like a flag on a corpse. **Master!** I lost the top of my head but I came back, who else would justify the pain? **Master!** *(He gets up.)* And Lvov is inferior to me. Both in language and imagination. I know all Lvov by heart. (36)

Apollo claims memorizing all Lvov's written work is his betrayal. (36) The dispute which ensues between Forjacks and Apollo is like an argument between two priests over scripture: the two disciples with the greatest knowledge of the Book of Lvov are the two who nearly end up murdering each other over their differing interpretations.

In their third appearance, the Chorus relate a conundrum to Lvov: "Even the blind see/And doubt comes to the infatuated/Lvov" (26). Using his style of language, they mock him and try to convince him that his disciples all doubt his abilities. The 'cloud of laughter' is heard, punctuating this message. Lvov exclaims: "How can I hear myself!" (26). This comment raises the question of whether or not these voices are in his head (his conscience) or his soul (a faith/doubt

dialectic), and perhaps a combination of the two. While Lvov doubts the disciples, the Chorus works to instill doubt in him about himself and the wellbeing of his congregation in society. The Chorus have established themselves as society, or the public, and as they have grown more antagonistic toward Lvov they are "the people [who] see [his] slipping self." (26) Their mocking of Lvov intensifies and they begin to take on a militant collective quality, not unlike a people's revolutionary army. They ridicule him by asking for a "slogan" (26). The masses appreciate short slogans and other rallying cries that they can chant and carve into public property. They want to take his ideas and simplify them into a slogan; if they can reduce his ideas to cliche then they have control over him. Lvov refuses to answer, so they call him a "snob". (26) At this point Lvov is clearly seen to be an intellectual leader, persecuted and under threat of censor; the intertextual signification strategy demonstrates that he resembles Jesus Christ in this respect. Or, in fact, his situation is not unlike many minority political and intellectual leaders in defiance of a hostile status quo. At the end of the fourth Chorus appearance, Lvov exclaims, "I defy your power of forgetting!...[d]o you think I lived this terrible life to be forgotten?" (38)

Just as the audience might be seeing Lvov in a romantically flattering light, that of the oppressed intellectual leader, denied his rights by a militant regime,

Barker subverts this image. As the audience should be paralleling Lvov with Christ, Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., etc., Barker has him confess to the Chorus, "I am not afraid of death. I am afraid of being revealed..." (26) The question of Lvov's vanity arises within the play's inner frame; if the audience makes a connection between Lvov and historical leaders, this question arises within the outer frame too. To be revealed is to be shown to be human; Lvov is what the Chorus call him, a "[s]on of the people" (38) but he understands that in order for people to follow him, he must appear to be larger than life. He must be an influential, constructed public image. Through both the intertextual signification and the metafictional/metadramatic strategies, Barker demonstrates the harm that can be caused to the individual by the constructed images of social or cultural institutions. Barker demonstrates how destructive urges, like Lvov's vanity, can create social structures of habit and routine (other destructive urges) throughout history.

Similar to the two previous parables, the language in *The Economy of The Itinerant Player* has a polysemous quality. A blind itinerant Violinist seduces a Nun. He begins by getting her attention, followed by her food, her support, her clothing, and finally her body. The Macs discover the Violinist raping the Nun; consequently he leaves her in order to entertain them. The Macs have nothing to give him, but agree to bring him along with them on their journey. The Nun

joins them too. In light of the preceding play sequence, it is interesting to note that the Violinist's economy is built upon images of deception. This is ironic considering he is blind. Nevertheless, he is keenly aware of appearances and establishes them in his financial favour. He snaps his bow across his knee in order to elicit the Nun's pity, and then later, in the presence of the Macs, he uses it to appear to be the victim of the Nun. Also, whereas initially it appears as though he wants the Nun's habit for warmth or protection because his own garments are decrepit; in fact, he wants her habit because people trust it, and thus they can robbed more easily.

The Violinist depends for his survival on the presence of people. A number of times in the parable he speaks about trying to find people. He must go toward the sound of the guns and receive charity from the soldiers there; he considers the presence of the Nun and the Macs a "surplus" (28) to his economy because he knows he may survive if they are near; he wants to go with the soldiers so they will lead him to the roads and travellers with money.

As they exit, the Macs respond to the Violinist's recruitment of the Nun to help him rob people by saying, "**Thus we might all survive.**" (28) The parable demonstrates the Violinist's ability to deconstruct and manipulate appearances and how this allows him to prosper. The habitual routine of the Macs and the lack of direction of the Nun are no match for the

Violinist's perception and creative ingenuity. Despite the group's apparent mutual dependence, the underlying truth is that the Violinist has control. The parable metaphorically explores the relationship between capitalism, society's governing bodies and the church. Each audience member will have their own relationship to these social bodies, and given their unique context, they should have a distinct perception of capitalistic domination suggested in the parable.

Returning to the central story, Ella's entrance is difficult for her because none of the others noticed her absence. She is quiet and unimposing and many of the disciples forget her membership. The group discusses this problem with varying degrees of sympathy. Like Nietzsche, Lvov places great importance upon an individual's attempts at self-realization; especially as this is achieved through the suffering and cruelty of self-overcoming.[199] Lvov addresses Ella's problem the following way:

> LVOV. It is clear, for all of us, that you have failed to make yourself either loved or hated.
> ELLA. Yes
> LVOV. It must be you who is to blame for it.
> ELLA. Yes.
> APOLLO. No, this is terrible, this is -
> LVOV. No, don't apologize! She needs no, and asks for no, nor credits any **apology**.
> APOLLO. I am ashamed -
> LVOV. No, it is her, let her be ashamed. *(Pause.)*
> ELLA. I find it hard to speak. So terribly hard... (29)

It is typical of a Barker character to place importance upon

---

[199] Sarup 97-98.

language as a badge of identity; almost as if to say, 'I speak, therefore I am [a subject]'.[200] Ella further reinforces Lvov's criticism by saying, "I want words, and sentences to splash all over you. I want myself to come out and say **This is Ella. It is impossible to ignore Ella.**" (29) She goes so far as to say that "Until I exist [through language], I am contemptible." (29) A representative of a younger generation, Ella is the most disenfranchised disciple; in search for identity, like so many of her generation, she has been unable to develop the necessary skills and tools to do so. Touching on the metafictional/metadramatic

---

[200] Indeed, this variation on Descartes's philosophical statement, 'I think, therefore I am', is significant because the postmodern nature of The Last Supper calls into question how an individual's identity is represented. Postmodernism makes a critique of the human subject, and the term 'subject' refers to something different from the term 'individual'. The latter term dates from the Renaissance and presupposes that man is a free, intellectual agent and that thinking processes are not coerced by historical or cultural circumstances. In Descartes's 'I think, therefore I am', the 'I' assumes itself to be fully conscious, and hence self-knowable. Postmodern thinking, through the advances of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, has attempted to deconstruct the conceptions by means of which we have so far understood human beings. The term 'subject' helps us to conceive of human reality as a construction, as a product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious. To many postmodern analysts, language is the most meaningful signifying activity a subject can perform.

signification strategy, in the character of Ella, Barker is giving the audience a view of a youth suffering the same sense of disenfranchisement as many young people in contemporary western society; her claim of being without a valid means of discourse within the group is a resounding truth for youth today. Addressing her dilemma, an array of pity and compromise are shown by most of the disciples. This is soon brought to an end, however, with Lvov's denunciation of their behaviour. In effect he tells them that 'pity is theft', that Ella must not miss this opportunity of humiliation and shame to learn about herself.

Marya enters with her dress badly stained with blood. She tells us that she has just been helping a soldier store the limbs of war casualties in a hut, just outside the house. As she comes in to sit down with the rest of them for supper, Lvov decides they will not have the meal after all. This deeply wounds Susannah, who sees it as her role to feed Lvov. Lvov, however, will not be persuaded, by her or the others, and the supper is put off. Lvov does not feel that they are worthy of the sacred fulfilment that the last supper will offer. Apollo does his best to keep the group amused, he tells stories, reminisces, and even attempts to put a positive perspective on the current state of things:

> How beautiful it is, this table cloth. No wonder you lay your hands like flowers. What does it matter if the menu stinks, we have a table cloth white as a glacier, stiff as a glacier...I used to sit in cafes with one glass...an oasis in a white landscape...all's well if the launderers are

busy....! (30)

Apollo creates an atmosphere of peace, but it is short-lived as the others are soon ridiculing one another. The unruly behaviour of the disciples prompts the appearance of the Chorus who "*assert*" (31) themselves; this is their fourth appearance in the play. For Lvov, the significant outcome of his discussion is the hurtful acknowledgement that the disciples are beginning to feel greater sympathy than respect for him. He now knows he must die in order to maintain his image, and that his death must somehow free the disciples from their dependency upon him and their hatred for each other. He informs the Chorus that he is "**turning their love into hate.**" (31) Lvov seems to indicate that if he attracts the hatred of his disciples, they will no longer be dependent upon him nor will they fight one another for his approval.

An Officer enters proclaiming that their gathering is illegal. Lvov rises to the occasion and attempts to distract the Officer from his duty. Despite this effort, the Officer cannot be diverted for long and proceeds to arrest Lvov. Anna tries to coax him outside for sex, but the Officer is adamant, he maintains that "love cannot undo [his] orders." (33) Arnold cannot accept this and summons the courage to bear the Officer to the ground, throttling the life out of him. According to the stage directions, Arnold's murder of the Officer should take a long time. Once the Officer is dead, Arnold "*walks to a chair and sits, his hands hanging at his sides...*[he] *weeps,*

his shoulders heaving." (33) Lvov acknowledges that love can undo the Officer's orders, and having recognized this he tries to turn Arnold's love to hate. Lvov belittles Arnold's sacrifice, and Ivory follows suit. Appalled at the lack of gratitude, coupled with disbelief over what he has done, Arnold protests:

> ARNOLD. *(standing).* **It was a sacrifice! It was a sacrifice.**
> GISELA. My wrists are like reeds. *(She looks at them.)* Reeds!
> ARNOLD. **Why do I require you? Why do I need you? I hate you.**
> GISELA. You couldn't hurt a fly with these...
> ARNOLD. I could so easily - I could -
> LVOV. Yes.
> ARNOLD. **So easily.** (33)

Lvov wants Arnold to say that he could so easily kill him. Arnold must kill the fiction upon which he is dependent. This summons the intertextual signification strategy in that the outcome of Arnold's sacrifice expropriates the traditional view of Christian faith. Arnold's struggle to confront and overcome what he has done for Lvov should be seen as a recreation of his morality. His recognition of hate for Lvov, as a fictional centre of his life, should be seen as the beginning of an empowering process because it is a break with this dependency.

The parable entitled *The Consolations Of Accumulations* begins with an undernourished Man, dancing with an imaginary partner. He is then met by a Woman who is visibly diseased and dragging a bundle of possessions. He begs her to dance with him, and reluctantly she does. They dance a few steps when the

Macs appear, attracted by the sound of the Man's gramophone. The Macs watch the dance, but suddenly the Man collapses to the floor, and the music ceases. The soldiers ask the Woman about her bag of loot, and begin ridiculing her for carrying around something which is useless to her now. She has a hope that the loot may help her survive when the war is over; but her ulcerated legs have made her too weak to effectively carry the goods. She asks the soldiers for a hand; they say they will carry her, but not the loot. She tries to appeal to their pity, but failing that, she orders them and they obey her command, carrying away both her and the loot.

Following in the pattern of the previous parables, the language in the fourth parable is polysemous and therefore, metaphorically, it should reverberate on many levels for the audience. Generally the parable gives the audience further insight into the world of the play, whereby they may compare it with their own. The Man, who is a doctor, maintains that "[t]he task before us is not to cure deformity but to describe it differently." (33) This, he explains "is the function of learning in an age of disease." (33) Within the audience's inner frame of experience, this line refers to the Woman's ulcerated legs and shows an open-minded tolerance which the audience might well take heed of, considering the outer frame of their experience, a world threatened by A.I.D.S..

In the fifth play sequence Lvov orders the disciples to take the supper outside and leave it on the pavement for

whoever will take it. Reluctantly they do so, trying to prove their love for him. Notwithstanding, Lvov still believes they are capable of betrayal. He describes betrayal as a lack of trust in him, the disciples should trust that he will provide them with food, and put what they have on the street. This trust is a freedom and respect within the group and for Lvov it constitutes the love which they must have within. Each disciple discusses what constitutes a betrayal of Lvov. For Ivory it is the loss of freedom, Lvov spoke about, and for him it comes of finding his own identity. Up to this point, his betrayal of Lvov has been to imitate Lvov:

> All my life, I think I wanted to be like other people. And seeing you, I wanted to be you. I still do. I move like you. Look, this gesture - my arm like this - is pure imitation. That can't be freedom, can it? Freedom must be ceasing to be you. (35)

For Dora, her betrayal has been a mimicking of Lvov as well. She realizes that the "beauty of Lvov [is] that he arrived complete." (35) As a teacher she has attempted to duplicate this completeness of form herself, and this has been her downfall. Lvov's question of betrayal causes her own inquiry: "The question is...whether we admire completeness. Whether we might not rather admire - flexibility, growth, deterioration, alteration..." (35) The process of questioning described by Dora amounts to a difficult pedagogy, but because she has discovered it herself it is freedom, and no longer an imitation of Lvov which constitutes betrayal.

Lvov asks the others how they might betray him. They

all describe routines, conventional lifestyles and habitual ways of existing. Anna would marry "a glamorous idiot who [would] ruin her life..." (36) She would become "his thing" and she would trivialize herself with him, "danc[ing] in the lights and imitat[ing] love." (36) Sloman's betrayal would be to go "down into the street and preach... the likeness of all men. The commonness of all things." (36) Gisela describes her betrayal as "happiness" (36) but it appears she means contentment. She describes her betrayal as "[t]he aching for the absent thing might die...and in its place there might be...a continuing fascination with the existent..." (36) Gisela suggests that her betrayal would be a continual contentment with the status quo, and an end to inquiry. Ivory has suggested that imitation is his betrayal, and here he mockingly uses Sloman as an example of someone he might choose to imitate. Apollo begins by saying his betrayal is like Gisela's, a contentment with the simple pleasures of life. Then, he launches into a speech about longing for subservience and finishing with the declaration: "I know all Lvov by heart." (36) This, of course, is Forjacks's territory and the two engage in a bitter contest of who can remember more of Lvov by heart. In this futile struggle, both Forjacks and Apollo demonstrate their betrayal of Lvov, they have remembered the words but they have forgotten their import.

At the height of the two mens' competition, the Chorus appears to Lvov. He complains about the disciples' absurd and

contemptible behaviour. The competition between Forjacks and Apollo is an example of the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy. The need in both of them to master all the available information about Lvov demonstrates the destructive urge in humanity's pursuit of greater amounts of information without an equally great sensitivity to understand it. The ludicrous contest of memorization between the two disciples confirms the ease with which they forget to consider the meaning of the words and titles they remember.

Alongside the betrayal of his disciples, the Chorus continues to fuel Lvov's doubt about the future of his congregation. The Chorus encourages Lvov to die, and taunts him for being relatively unimportant in society, after all he is only "a child of the people."(38) The indignation of the Chorus is broken by the child of the congregation. From under the table, where she has hidden herself, Ella delivers her betrayal. She describes how she killed her infant for not having a railway ticket. Her story of murder is a testament to the survival of the fittest mentality in the world of the play (inner frame) and the neo-conservatism of the western world for which the play was written (outer frame):

> I killed my child. Is anybody listening? I did it in a railway carriage. It had no ticket. It should have had a ticket, shouldn't it? I think the way this war has made people cunning is the most sickening thing and never paying your debts and scrounging and skyving is the rule not the exception, the pleasure in settling one of them I could not begin to tell you **no ticket well that's your. Scrounging, well this time you.** I had one, of course. I, who have not two halfpennies to rub

> together. I got one at some sacrifice and if more people did the same then. *(Pause.)* (38)

Ella 'bursts'. Her language conveys the arrogance of one who has opinions but has been kept silent for too long. Next she articulates her perspective on Lvov's marginal position in society. She speaks with power and conviction, until doubt overtakes her and her bitterness is expressed:

> *(The cloud of laughter.)* You have been years and still we're twelve. Forjacks was a torturer and there are several murders among us, it is an unappetising clique and rather dirty. The women are whores and if they are not they wish to be - (38)

The 'cloud of laughter' and air of doubt in Lvov which usually are a part of the Chorus's dialogue accompany Ella's lines. Her denunciation of the disciples is cut short by Dora, who objects to being called a whore. Having her language cut-off, she demands a kiss from Dora, and true to the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy, Ella's intuition triumphs over the logic of argument. She reinforces this by saying that life has no significance or meaning, and yet humanity continues to discriminate.

In the fifth parable, *How The Child Was Lost*, the Macs are under the impression that McNoy has given birth to a child. Metaphorically the birth represents a cry of life from within the deadening routine of the 'demolition squad':

> McSTAIN....there came upon us a cry of mortality.
> McNOY. In me especially.
> MacATTLEE. In him the cry called loudest.
> McNOY. I ached for love beyond the mundane obligations of the squad. (39)

The Macs explain the birth in mythological terms. After six

weeks of seeing nothing but cadavers along their routine patrol of walking in circles, it occurs to them that perhaps they are the only survivors of the war. Their combined terror and ecstasy at this prospect causes them to yearned for new experiences. In McNoy this yearning was felt the greatest, and consequently he gives birth in his imagination to a new life.

In McNoy's need to rejoice the birth, he chooses to ignore the details which call his maternity into question. He believes he "ripped" (40), and out came the Child they see wandering around before them. The Macs quarrel over the truth of the birth, and meanwhile the Child wanders off, picks up a small bomb, and begins tossing it up and down. McStain sees the danger in what the Child is doing and tries to take the bomb away. McNoy and MacAttlee, still too preoccupied with how the Child has come into their life, are unaware of the danger now posed to all their lives. A Woman appears, scolds the Child, and it leaves with her. McNoy says to her, "[w]e thought we were alone in the world..." (40) and the Woman says, "You are." (40) In disillusionment the Macs move on; an explosion offstage tells them of the fate of the Child, and the audience is left to consider how McNoy's 'dream' might have been saved.

Lvov begins the sixth play sequence by trying to turn Gisela's love for him into hate. He seduces her to leave the others to engage in sex with him. The others are uneasy about

this and express their bitterness and dissatisfaction in various ways. Lvov attempts to elucidate his actions by reminding them of life's important qualities:

> LVOV. *(inspired)*. I thought of life as a basket!
> And in the basket, fruits! Name the fruits!
> IVORY. Love.
> LVOV. Love.
> ANNA. Laughter.
> LVOV. Laughter - of a sort -
> FORJACKS. Years!
> LVOV. Years! Years!
> MARYA. Ecstasy.
> LVOV. Ecstasy.
> DORA. Melancholy.
> LVOV. Melancholy, or there could be no ecstasy.
> (41)

Lvov tells them without ecstasy's dialectical opposite, melancholy, there can be no appreciation nor existence of ecstasy in life. The fruits of life described create a balanced sense of morality in those who fill their basket. Lvov takes Gisela away to give her a fruit of hate to keep alongside her love for him, and she returns with the following insight: "There is no such thing as sin. Merely violence to the self." (43) It is this individual measure of morality achieved by the disciples that Barker wants to initiate an audience's reception of the play.

Before the beginning of the sixth parable, Marya indicates the end of the war by announcing the return of live soldiers on the trains from the front. The sixth parable, entitled *The Fleeting Appearance Of An Idealist*, reflects this change in that the world of the parables are now populated with characters from the play sequences and vice versa.

In this parable a Gunner returns home from war and Lvov makes a decision about his own death. Lvov warns the Gunner that he was not tired of killing, he was tired of killing meaninglessly; in effect, he says that peace has put an end to the mundane routine of war but peace will have its own deadening routine and from this will arise a new excuse for war. The Chorus appears, and are surprised that Lvov is still alive. They tell him that he is in a new world, and by the way they announce this it appears as though they are on the side of the victorious army: **"And we shall be / All in one line / Arms linked / The shrill voice of / The popular and..."** (43) The Chorus convinces Lvov that now is definitely the time for him to die. The Macs appear, and kneel to Lvov. They tell him "[w]e kill no - body" (44) and Lvov equates their statement with that of the Gunner's; that is, they no longer kill because they need a better excuse to do so. This is an accurate reflection of the Macs' reality, steeped in routine and visibly without direction. The connection made between the Macs and the Gunner's experience summons the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy in its statement about war.

Lvov has a bitter confrontation with Gisela over their sexual encounter, and this dialogue is juxtaposed with the description of a sexual encounter between the Gunner and his lover. For some audience members the connection between Jesus Christ and Lvov will become tenuous at this point. Lvov has

sexually abused Gisela, and as she explains, he has made her hate her own flesh. Considering the intertextual strategy however, it is important for an audience to recognize that once Gisela has endured the pain and insult of her sexual encounter with Lvov, his reaction to her outburst forces her to examine herself: "I have a choice. If I don't hate you, I have only myself to hate. And I am not going to gnaw myself to naked nerve and bone." (45) This moment is presented in contrast to the encounter between the Gunner and his wife, the Woman; while they enjoy a more amicable encounter than Lvov and Gisela, their peace quickly turns into a party to protect the peace, and eventually another war. "Speaking as a party woman," (45) the Gunner's wife sends him off to war, saying, "Come back victorious, or not at all." (45) He responds appropriately with idealistic platitudes about the world belonging to him, and "[f]or this one I will die. And if necessary, make others die." (45) Barker seems to indicate in this juxtaposition that it is the encounter between Lvov and Gisela that is closer to the spirit of Christianity, while the actions of the Gunner and his wife are what has taken place historically.

Judith enters and persuades Lvov that he must die as soon as possible, in order to immortalize himself in history. She tells him, "it is impossible for you to continue. And if all you have done is not to be turned into dust, and error, yes, you must. They have got the measure of you, Lvov." (45)

In reference to this last comment, she lists examples, the clever disciples parody him, while the ones who are not clever complain at his ingratitude. Judith entreats Lvov to let her help him reach his destiny. She compares herself to the others:

> I alone of all of them, I truly want to know. I alone, prefer knowledge to peace. You taught me everything. Everything. But one thing you cannot teach me is what it is to live without you. And I have to know. I want to help you to die, so that there is no one left. And after you there wont be. Anyone at all. Only cacophony. And then I shall be solely responsible. The sole proprietor of my mind. So you see, I have to know. That is real, and pure, and utter curiosity. It was inevitable, wasn't it, that one of us would take your words to heart? (45)

Lvov places trust in Judith and tells her of his anxieties, he says, "Judith, how you force greatness on me...and I would love to swerve...be kind - " (46) Just as he reaches out to her she snaps back, and tells him that kindness is a murdered word. She implies that his reaching out to her is inappropriate, and that he must die tonight or she will loose her faith. Within the intertextual signification strategy, Lvov is not allowed to be fallible before Judith, and the audience should consider that the same impossible expectations were laid upon Christ and are still in effect for many of his ministers.

While the Chorus parodies Lvov's historical memory, once again raising doubt in him as to how he will be remembered after he is dead, he asks Judith to guess how he must die in order to live in the memory forever. She fails to

guess, and Lvov is proud that he has imagined such a provocative fate for himself. He exclaims, "Do you think I'd die like anybody else?" (48) Judith seems appalled that Lvov would inflict such a penalty on the others, and when she asks Lvov what happens if they just say no, he responds by telling her: "Because you will want it finished. You will not settle for anything less. It's the investment the servant makes in servitude." (48) Lvov is bargaining on the fact that his disciples are conditioned to be subservient enough that they will continue to serve him after his death. Referring to the intertextual signification strategy, this disempowering 'servitude' is the foundation upon which the Christian church has been built. Lvov's statement raises a question with the audience about the difference between faith and servitude in Christianity.

The Authentic Madness Of A Redundant Class immediately follows the former parable. McStain is dead, and the other two Macs try to come to grips with this occurrence. Ivory appears, he seems to have left the other disciples, and having lived all his life imitating other people, he suggests that he could become McStain. McNoy and MacAttlee, reluctant at first, eventually agree to allow Ivory to become McStain. The three set out to unsling bells together.

Metaphorically, the title of the parable applies to both the Macs and Ivory, the former are redundant because the war is over and the latter because the age of aristocracy is

clearly finished. It is interesting to note that a redundant aristocrat was a suitable replacement for a position within the play's ruling body.

The seventh play sequence begins with the disciples all fast asleep. Lvov wakes them and announces that they are to murder him, and then consume his body for supper. Sloman is persistent in warning the others that what Lvov is doing is contrived and insincere; a cover-up for his waning abilities as a leader and teacher. Unheeding Sloman's advice, the others are adamant in their belief in Lvov, and begin preparation for the deed. Apollo has Lvov climb on his back. Lvov does so, but then calls Judith to tell her that he has 'changed his mind' about the planned murder. Judith is deaf to his cries, and is the first to drive the knife into him. Anna is the next to stab him; followed by Dora, who scoffs at Lvov's continued protestations; and then Marya. While this is happening, the Chorus provides a kind of running commentary of the spectacle before them.

The Chorus begins by voicing disapproval of the ritual killing: **"We express the common man's / The man on the street's objection to...The arrogance of / And the special pleading..."** (52) This self-righteous indignation is appropriate to the doubting, taunting role they have played throughout the play. As Lvov's ritual sacrifice continues, however, and the disciples become possessed by power of the oblation, "*begin[ning], in an intoxicated way, to hop up and*

down." (52) The Chorus also becomes enchanted, and their rebuffs turn to chants of desire and ecstasy: **"We want / We want / A room with a view / We want / We want / Sex in a bedroom / We want to be ashamed / We want / We want to be ashamed / We want..."** (52) It is as if in the moment of Lvov's death the disciples -- the body of faith in Lvov -- are able to combine with the Chorus -- the body of doubt -- and create a gestaltic union.

The action of combining the bodies of faith and doubt in Lvov's sacrifice into a single congregation is a part of becoming a community with a vision beyond faith. In the analysis of Northrop Frye,

> such vision is, among other things, the quality in all serious religions that enable them to be associated with human products of culture and imagination, where the limit is the conceivable and not the actual.[201]

This is what should be conveyed to the audience in their experience of the play through the two-frames. Barker, like Frye, see art as a means whereby culture and imagination may enrich a public's religious vision. In The Last Supper, Barker attempts to rouse active consideration of an individual's spiritual vision in contemporary western society, and as the audience bring their perceptions into the theatre, through their experience of play in the inner frame, they may challenge and enrich their perception of this vision where the two frames intersect.

---

[201] Frye, The Great Code 232.

Similar to the Chorus in the play, who move from an Apollonian distaste for the cult of Lvov to an affirmation of a ritual devoted to him, society should make the same discovery in the Dionysian element of the theatre, as Nietzsche suggests:

> The effects of the Dionysiac spirit struck the Apollonian Greeks as titanic and barbaric; yet they could not disguise from themselves the fact that they were essentially akin to those deposed Titans and heroes. They felt more than that: their whole existence with its temperate beauty, rested upon a base of suffering and *knowledge* which had been hidden from them until the reinstatement of Dionysus uncovered it once more. And lo and behold! Apollo found it impossible to live without Dionysus. The elements of titanism and barbarism turned out to be quite as fundamental as the Apollonian element.[202]

Comparable to Nietzsche, Barker craves a Dionysian cultural awakening in western contemporary society. There already exists both a Christian religious community and a theatre community, but in The Last Supper, through content and form, he questions the metaphor of unity and integration common to both communities. Turning this metaphorical structure inside out, he asks his audience to consider a metaphor of particularity, and trust their individual perspective or "To see the world in a grain of sand."[203] By offering this openness to his audience, Barker presents a play which may be continuously active in their minds. In form the play grows, and like its content tries to avoid a single direction toward

---

[202] Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy" 822.

[203] Frye, The Great Code 167.

nothingness and death in lieu of a unique community.

Of course, Barker could not leave his audience with this idealistic utopian image. With the sacrificial ceremony nearly completed, the door flies open, and a Farmer enters. He has renounced his belief in Lvov, but he knows of others who have not, and will pay him handsomely for a token of Lvov. The Farmer cuts off one of Lvov's fingers, to sell to these people. In lieu of the metafictional/metadramatic signification strategy, the Farmer's destructive urge is seen to be the cynicism that will exist alongside the vision of any cultural community.

The eighth parable, entitled *The Complex Origins Of Domesticity*, demonstrates the negative effects domesticity has had upon the dionysian element in both theatre and religion. The parable begins as McNoy and MacAttlee appear, carrying Ivory in a chair. They are discussing the clouds of laughter, heard throughout the play. It is essentially 'canned laughter' which Ivory describes as "the irrepressible expression of solidarity which has become detached from humanity and drifts over the landscape." (53) Essentially he describes the domestication of laughter. Just then a Seamstress enters, holding a pair of trousers. She is looking for McStain, or so she says, but actually she is looking for a husband. Ivory accommodates her request, having made the decision that he will part with the other two and live with the seamstress. When this seems for certain, McNoy strikes a fatal blow to

Ivory's head. The Seamstress is apparently undaunted by this, and attempts the same routine with McNoy. She has turned love into a routine, domestic enterprise, alongside her sewing. Similar to theatre and religion, it is the death of love to domesticate it so.

In the eighth play sequence an Officer arrives. He claims the war is over, and he has come to arrest Lvov. The new regime does not tolerate intellects. He sees that Lvov is not there, and begins to leave. As he leaves, however, he treads on a pair of glasses which he believes belong to Lvov. Sloman affirms that Lvov is with them, and beckons the disciples to hold hands; they do so. Sloman sees this manoeuvre as an effective defence against the oppressors; however, ironically, it makes them vulnerable to censorship. At this moment the two remaining Macs, MacAttlee and McNoy, enter singing. They sing "The Song" (56) and when they have finished, the Officer orders them to rope the disciples; they do so with the bell ropes. A sound of celebration is heard in the distance; the Officer drifts toward it. The two soldiers sit and smoke as the roped disciples drift to and fro. The final image is that of a congregation censored by the authorities or, on a more subtle level, they have become a church body. They are a group charged with anxiety because they cannot share their experience of Lvov. In this respect, Barker portrays the ultimate destructive end of Christianity, that of an anxiety-filled assembly controlled by ruling

parties.

In The Last Supper, Barker invokes critical analysis of western society's reliance on the structures of Christian ethics, ideology and myth. The play presents images of the destructive qualities fostered by the habit and collusion of individuals working within these structures; particularly in the way moral judgements are made in legal, educational and other social capacities. An audience member is made critically aware of the Christian church's moral practice and the effects this has had upon social and individual thinking in contemporary western society. Similar to the play's content, the form Barker establishes also obliges his audience to question and break habitual response patterns. As traditional conventions of morality are broken, so too are traditional means of understanding theatrical experience; no longer may an audience rely upon character, plot, story, or theme to guide them in their interpretation of the play. Barker demonstrates that customary elements of play construction, like the customs of Christian morality, are structures of unity and integration and take us only so far because they are derived from the finiteness of the human mind. He entreats his audience to grow with their experience of his plays, and work to expand their vision away from central structures into a more profound awareness.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE IN CONTEXT: A PARADIGM FOR POSTMODERN DRAMA

David Ian Rabey begins his introduction to a collection of Barker's essays, Arguments For A Theatre, by asking the following questions:

> Do we have the theatre we want? Do we have the audience we want?
>
> What is the meaning of 'we' in those two questions?
>
> By what rights do 'we' 'want' anything? On whose terms? In whose interests?[204]

At first glance these questions appear to be imperative to any public art form. These kinds of dramaturgical inquiries must be the underpinnings of all theatre companies responsible to their art and the public. However, as Rabey admits, it is difficult to find any current debate in the theatre in which such questions arise. The Theatre of Catastrophe addresses these questions, and having examined the dramaturgical means by which the texts of The Possibilities and The Last Supper foster this public debate, attention will be given to an exploration of the plays' stage life, and an examination of public approaches to these works which may help to illuminate the questions above.

---

[204] David Ian Rabey, "Introduction," Arguments For A Theatre (London: Calder, 1989) 1.

Briefly stated, three approaches will be taken toward examining the societal context of the Theatre of Catastrophe. First, and perhaps overall, the nature of postmodernism will be explored and how a postmodern approach toward public discourse is reflected in Barker's aesthetic. Second, Susan Bennett's two-frame model of audience reception theory will be further explored, this time focusing specifically on the context and perspective of the audience, from the outer frame inward. This examination will include questions concerning: the location of the theatre, physically within a community and culturally within the consciousness of individual community members; the theatre's architectural construction and how this may shape an audience's horizon of expectations; who makes up the audience and performance approaches toward them; and the technique used by actors and directors in bringing an audience into the world of a Barker text. Finally, the Theatre of Catastrophe will be viewed in a broader sociological context.

POSTMODERN DRAMA:

Barker recognizes that contemporary western theatre is driven by certain social, economic, political and historical factors. These factors oblige theatres to view their public as a large demographic mass. For instance, financial strategies are necessary for a theatre which must compete economically with other forms of marketed entertainments, and this entails attracting the largest possible audience with shared

characteristics and a common identity. Barker argues that this process of unification is damaging to the theatre's cultural potential. The collective- mentality in an audience creates restriction and distortion of individual possibilities, bringing about characteristics such as habitual expectations and limited abilities in confronting depth, range, effect, change.[205] Barker's drama appeals to practitioner and audience alike who feel constrained, compromised, even insulted, by having to diminish their imagination and creative potential in the theatre for fear of economic risk. In his view all parties suffer when theatre companies must diminish art so as not to violate the 'Procrustean spectre' of the homogeneous public mass. In addressing the question of why?, on whose terms?, and in whose interests?, Rabey says,

> Because drama is The Public Art, and it is usually implicitly interpreted as The Art of Solidarity. But - leapfrogging usual, implicit interpretations - what if a theatre located its aesthetic in addressing what lay beyond solidarity? Not everything that is 'public' can be identified as 'an act of solidarity' except by the most strenuous ideologue. 'What we have in common' is often invoked as our greatest sense of hope. The differences between us might be sources of hope, discovery and creativity also.[206]

The Theatre of Catastrophe creates an aesthetic of anxiety between the performance and the audience because it does not allow for the conventional communal experience of an audience

---

[205] Howard Barker, Arguments For A Theatre (London: Calder, 1989) 80-1.

[206] Rabey, "Introduction" 2.

attending a play. For Barker the bond between audience members is false, and their endurance of his plays, both ideologically and emotionally, should be a destabilizing experience which lends itself to individual response. In his view, only once the public has been liberated as individuals will they be capable of abandoning their conventional moral and intellectual baggage to explore a greater freedom of imagination offered through the plays.

By respecting the individual's need to question and imagine, the Theatre of Catastrophe is a postmodern art form. Barker is not alone in his perspective of empowering individuals in the theatre. Eugenio Barba has called this postmodern approach the Third Theatre, for him it represents the vision of a practitioner or company moving beyond the safe confines of institutional theatre. Like Barker, he sees the conventions and habits engendered by the theatre's institutional establishment as problematic in that it appears to have lost track of its purpose in society. In reference to this dilemma, Barba envisions the search for meaning in contemporary theatre as the responsibility of the individual, a personal discovery of the craft. His study of performance and anthropology has demonstrated that the disparate kinds of Third Theatre share a patient building up of the individual's physical, mental, intellectual, and emotional relationship with texts and spectators, without conforming to those balanced and proved relationships current at the centre of the

theatre.[207] As a metaphor for this personal development, he quotes Louis Jouvet's enigmatic observation: "There is a legacy from us to ourselves."[208] From this, Barba poses some fundamental questions:

> Is the legacy which I constructed still in my hands? Can I still recognize its value, or has it been tarnished by the passage of time, by the practice of the trade, or by the return to the flattened-out centre of the planet Theatre?[209]

These questions and their importance to the individual practitioner and audience member are what concern the postmodern theatre envisioned by Barker. Barba maintains that these questions represent the Third Theatre, and he uses an appropriate metaphor when he likens this theatre to the rings of Saturn. The Third Theatre makes up an expression of everything that escapes the gravitational pull of the centre, and refuses to be flattened out, just like the rings of Saturn. In Barba's model, at the centre of the planet Theatre are all the classical and modern theatrical movements with their implicit agendas and singular vision. The Theatre of Catastrophe is one of many theatrical entities, having escaped its gravitational pull because its mission is to pose questions rather than provide solutions; its vision is made in part by each audience member. Historically those creative and

---

[207] Eugenio Barba, "The Third Theatre: a Legacy from Us to Ourselves," New Theatre Quarterly 29 (February 1992): 3.

[208] Barba: 3.

[209] Barba: 3.

critical practices which have made up the central planet of Theatre, have based themselves on foundations that are expressive (artist-oriented), mimetic (world-imitative), and formalist (art as object). The impact of the Third Theatre, be it feminist, black, gay, post-colonial, or post-structuralist, has meant the addition of something else to these historical foundations and has effected a kind of merger of their concerns, but now with a new focus: the investigation of the social and ideological production of meaning.[210]

From this perspective, what is commonly called 'culture' in contemporary western society is seen as the effect of media representations, not their source. Western capitalist culture and its system of beliefs dominate our society, and it has been proven to have an incredible ability to normalize, or 'doxify',[211] theatrical signs and images no matter how disparate they may be; this is like the gravitational pull of these entities toward the centre. Only those forms of theatre able to resist doxification have

---

[210] Linda Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism (London: Routledge, 1989) 4-12.

[211] This term comes from Roland Barthes's general notion of the 'doxa' as public opinion or the 'Voice of Nature' and consensus, postmodernism works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations and their undeniable political import.

Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977) 47.

remained in the planet's rings. Underlying the notion of a postmodern critique found in the Theatre of Catastrophe, is a process of cultural 'de-doxification' which makes its audience aware that a majority of the public gather knowledge of the world from a network of socially established meaning systems, the discourses of popular culture. The combination of visuals and spoken text in a dramatic performance can self-consciously foreground an awareness of the discursive and signifying nature of cultural knowledge; this awareness is created by raising the question of the supposed transparency of representation. Western theatre, from its classical Aristotelian roots to present, has both documentary (topic) and formal (aesthetic) impulses which postmodernism confronts. This confrontation found in the Theatre of Catastrophe is where historical actuality meets Barker's style of presentation (i.e. the three signification strategies). Barker's aesthetic creates an awareness of media representation of the world that is often transparent, while leaving its own representation up to the audience. Audience awareness occurs at the juncture between Bennett's two frames of audience reception, and a study of representation becomes a study of the way in which narratives and images inform how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past.

Literary critic Linda Hutcheon claims that it is easiest to understand postmodern art forms when architecture

is used as a metaphor. For example, a postmodern architectural design of a house does not only display the representations of historical architectural styles that are de-naturalized, but it also conveys representational notions of a house, and the western social and economic structures which engender them. Furthermore, social concerns and aesthetic needs come together in an interrogation of the ideology of the stable family unit.[212] If the blueprint for this house was compared with a Barker play text, once transformed into a three dimensional structure or a live production, its inhabitants, practitioners and audience alike, should be prompted to pursue two lines of questioning. First, concerning the play text, Barker's use of character, language, theme, action and other dramatic elements borrow from historical traditions; however, in his play these elements are deconstructed and analyzed in their use. In this regard, like all postmodern artists, Barker's form of critique is complicit. Barker uses traditional dramatic elements but eventually subverts them, prompting practitioners and audience to question their notions of a play and how it is constructed from these elements. In a second line of questioning, production of a Barker play should present a form and content that will challenge an audience to question the place of theatre as a cultural institution in society. Offering challenges to conventional morality, socialism, and even what passes for common humanity, the theatre might become the

---

[212] Hutcheon 8.

public's place for assessment of and potential reconstruction of values long held in routine observance.

TWO FRAMES OF AUDIENCE RECEPTION:

The two lines of questioning which arise from viewing theatre metaphorically as a house correspond precisely with Bennett's two-frame model. The chief concern for postmodern analysis is where the efforts of those who have built and live (perform) within the theatrical structure (inner frame) meet with a visiting public (outer frame) with their own horizon of expectations of their visit to the house and how this influences their experience of the 'theatrical structure'. Similar to the postmodern perspective outlined above, the emphasis in the two-framed model is to encourage two critical practices in the spectator. First, each audience member should become critically aware of their expectations of an experience in the theatre, and realize how these have been fostered by other media. Second, this critical awareness should be translated to a continuous revision of habitual response to the dramatic presentation.

Bennett's audience reception theory speaks extensively about the audience's history and horizon of expectations coming into a performance space. Much of this has to do with the architecture of the theatre and its acknowledged place as a cultural institution within society. Preparation by both actors and audience set up a theatrical context wherein the

two frames may converge. The theatre exists in a particular location, and this is significant in that it may affect the establishment of a community of patrons. For instance, can a community of theatre-goers be made up from the local population or not? Would a community of patrons be afraid to venture into the area where the theatre exists? These are logistical questions never addressed by Barker's theories, and yet they are so significant to the production of his plays.

The geographical location and architectural design of the theatre space says much to an audience about a production, and should be considered as factors which influence reception of a play. These elements convey both aesthetic and ideological signs[213] which have a significant influence on the audience's outer frame of perception. Bennett's analysis points to the question of whether or not the physical conditions of the place where a Barker play occurs is

---

[213] Semiologist, Keir Elam gives a 'working definition' of a sign as "a two-faced entity linking a material *vehicle* or *signifier* with a mental *concept* or *signified*.

Semiotics, the study of signs, can best be defined as a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. As such it is equally concerned with processes of *signification* and with those of *communication*, i.e. the means whereby meanings are both generated and exchanged.

See Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama (London: Routledge, 1980) 1-31.

significant to its intended effect upon the audience. Barker has said that the tension between the audience and the play is an aesthetic of the Theatre of Catastrophe.[214] Is this possible in a conventional theatre, where the intended aesthetic is antithetical that proposed by Barker? Perhaps a re-invention of the place where theatre occurs is in order when production of a Theatre of Catastrophe play is considered. Barker's postmodern aesthetic may be more fully realized in a postmodern theatre space.

Bennett's study of architectural elements which frame the theatrical event are too extensive to adequately explore here; however, her discussion provokes important questions about the historical evolution of space allotted to performance versus space allotted to community interaction. She observes studies which demonstrate that since the beginning of the nineteenth century theatres have been designed with more space, be it foyers, rooms, or halls, where patrons may indulge in the pleasure of watching and being watched at a cultural event. Quoting Denys Lasdun, the architect of the National Theatre in London, England, it is clear that his design was meant to evoke classical precedents in his arrangement of public space: "The interconnected foyers are not unlike the ancient hypostyle whose communal floors evoked a warm and lively participation by the members of its

---

[214] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 17.

community."[215] Bennett further cites a theatre's practical need of a foyer, as they contain facilities which are important in the creation of an integrated social occasion for the audience and they often provide additional revenue for the theatre. She explains:

> Cloakrooms, restaurants, and bars are the most usual services, but increasingly stores or counters selling theatre-related goods have been incorporated. Clearly both mainstream institutions and smaller theatres welcome and need the extra money this can raise and, for the audience, it provides material evidence of both their support and cultural taste...In an endeavour to attract larger, and presumably appreciative audiences, foyers become the site of additional cultural attractions such as exhibitions and musical preludes. The foyer also functions as the site of receptions in celebration of first night or gala performances, often an occasion when theatre personnel are available 'to meet the public'. In the mainstream institution, this can provide tangible evidence of the elitism the ticket price represents. In other theatres, the opportunity to mix practitioners and audience is more likely to foster a club-like atmosphere as well as acting as an effective tool to increase the audience's familiarity with the political and/or artistic aims of the company.[216]

Before venturing into the playing space itself, a practitioner attempting to mount a Theatre of Catastrophe play must consider a multitude of expectations the public have in the theatre as a cultural institution. Bearing in mind that Barker wants to subvert the many conventions and habits established in the way an audience member experiences his plays, the outer

---

[215] Susan Bennett, Theatre Audiences (London: Routledge, 1990) 139.

[216] Bennett, Theatre Audiences 140-141.

frame of this experience must now be addressed.

Bennett's list of purposes attributed to a theatre foyer suggests an extensive sum of influences on an audience's horizon of expectation, indeed, even before they have entered the performance space. If a director attempts to undermine these expectations in a given production, s/he must take into account that most of the public in contemporary western society have come to expect these conventions in theatre. Two approaches to the development of an audience's horizon of expectations are seen in Appendix One and Two of this dissertation. The first two appendices are interviews with directors Alan Edwards and Will Zaichkowski, both have mounted productions of The Possibilities. Zaichkowski had little need to focus on a build-up of audience expectation because his production was a directing exercise, presented in the Drama Department at the University of Alberta. The development of audience expectation outside of the playing space is not a concern in this part of the directing curriculum. Although it is not attributable to the university theatre where this production occurred, it could be said that the audience attending these performances were prepared for experimentation, in view of the scholastic framework of this production. The situation for Edwards, on the other hand, was vastly different. Mounting the play as one of many productions in the Edmonton Fringe Festival, considerations were necessarily made concerning the development of audience

expectation for the play; although most of these were within the performance space. Budget and schedule constraints restricted venturing too far in the direction of preparing the audience outside of their stage space; indeed, at most fringe stages there is no other space than the stage space. Edwards decided that to hand out programs before performances was the best solution to initiating an audience to the Theatre of Catastrophe. Quoted below is an excerpt from the appendix interview where Edwards describes the approach he took:

> Alan Edwards: ...Let's face it, quite often the Edmonton Fringe can be like a 'fast food' theatre festival, people moving from one course to the next. Before people have had any time to think about one show they're in the line up for the next one. So, putting a play like <u>The Possibilities</u> into this kind of environment did require a couple of - not unreasonable - concessions on my part, and one was that it not be too long. Also, many of our shows were scheduled into the midnight time slot, so you had to consider what an audience would be capable of at 1:00 am and beyond....
>
> Andrew Houston: Your program had a very powerful logo, with sculls and armaments, and the production was subtitled "Theatre of War". What was your intention in giving the audience this first impression of the play?
>
> A.E.: One of the things I responded to in the play was Barker's paradoxical nature. His plays are poetic, refined, and beautiful in some respects, while at the same time they have a vile, ugly, and violent quality. These paradoxical qualities arose in our production. As generic as we tried to make each scene, the action always ended up emphasizing the ugly, violent side, while the langauge maintained the grace and beauty of the moment.
>
> Getting back to the program. I chose the image of Theatre of War because I've had that graphic for years and I always wanted to use it as a fringe poster. It speaks volumes to me: it's gritty, it's agit-prop, it's wild. At the same time, the program itself, is laser printed, it's clearly laid out, it

> contains some Barker quotes, and for the most part has a refined look on the inside. In this respect, the program has the same paradoxical nature as the play. Initially the play has the engaging quality of propaganda but then as each scene progresses it is up to the audience to follow it along to their own conclusions.[217]

Edwards's use of the 'Theatre of War' logo is an example of a personalized approach toward preparing an audience's horizon of expectations before they enter the playing space. It is interesting to note that despite his legitimization of his use of the logo, an argument could be made suggesting the misappropriation of an agit-prop style of publicity for a play that in form, content, and not to mention the playwright's intention, is antithetical to agit-prop.

Evident from the stylization of his program and the interview, Edwards's production of The Possibilities appropriated characteristics contradictory to the de-contextualized style intended by Barker. Directorially he saw the play's political insights to be theatrically the strongest, and Barker has admitted his plays offer an openness to interpretation. Dramaturgically this openness is meant to be passed on for each audience member to make choices, but in the circumstances of a fringe festival, Edwards's pragmatism makes sense. At the Edmonton Fringe Festival, each participating theatre company has a limited number of performances, and all must sell seats aggressively to a public receiving publicity from over one hundred productions at once.

---

[217] See Appendix One, ...(pages?).

This might be considered exceptional, or merely an amplification of the theatre marketplace experienced year round. In the latter case, problems inherent to philosophies concerning the audience in The Theatre of Catastrophe arise. For example, how do practitioners prepare an audience for the kind of interpretive role Barker intends, or how may the public be encouraged to transcend the habits and conventions the Theatre of Catastrophe is meant to subvert in performance. Barker's theories offer no hypothetical model for production; while his language and unique dramatic form offer no end of imaginative stimulus, ultimately the responsibility of realizing the Theatre of Catastrophe is born by the invention of the actor and director.

Barker rarely outlines approaches to performance of his plays; he usually leaves this responsibility in the hands of trusted practitioners. In an interview with the C.B.C., on the eve of the Necessary Angel's production of The Europeans in Toronto, Barker was asked if the thought bothered him that he was about to watch a performance of one of his plays, produced entirely in his absence and by a foreign theatre company. He gave the following response:

> I'm not one of those authors who believes in a unitary text; that there is only one way of playing the text. When I work on a play in England, and I often work with my own company of actors [The Wrestling School], of course I am deeply involved in the presentation - the effects and values - of that production. But once that production has occurred, the text, it seems to me, is released into the air and it becomes the property of anyone who happens to come by it, and the productions they

> do of it are their own affair. For example, often I have been into Germany to see productions of my work, and I have not always been able to fully recognize what I thought the play was about. On the other hand, I think that is the nature of theatrical art; you cannot protect it against interpretation. So, when I go to other countries to see my plays I expect the productions within the context of that society.[218]

Barker's idiom, "It's a theatre of openness: it invites choice or invites a flight from choice,"[219] pertains to practitioners as well as audience.

In a rare occurrence when Barker was moved to write about a production approach to one of his plays, ironically, he does so about a foreign production. The article, entitled "Juha Malmivaara's 'Scenes from an Execution', Turku, Finland, 1988", is the only example on record of Barker detailing a production of his work. Published exclusively in Arguments For A Theatre, it appears to be an exemplar of a Theatre of Catastrophe performance. He begins by mentioning that Malmivaara had attempted a production of The Love of a Good Man but had been unsuccessful. Apparently the production alienated his audiences to the point where they eventually played to empty houses. It was at this point, Barker relates, referring to himself in third person, that Malmivaara made a

---

[218] "Interview with Howard Barker," interviewed by Erika Ritter, prod. Sandra Rabinovitch, Writers and Company, C.B.C. Stereo, Toronto, 6 April 1990.

[219] Finlay Donesky, "Oppression, Resistence, and the Writer's Testament," New Theatre Quarterly 8 (Summer 1986): 344.

significant discovery:

> He understood that with Barker the theatre itself was a barrier to communication. He recognized that the structure of the building and its status in the community was injurious to the power of the work. The theatre-as-monument infected the audience, excluding whole groups of the community and reinforcing the commoditization of art.
>
> He chose, instead of allowing the audience to sit in judgement on the work from the jury box of the stalls, to insist on their discomfort, which was the same discomfort experienced by the actors. He made the audience pay a price for its art by placing the production in a mile-long shed. When it saw this shed, the audience knew the conditions were different. They were prepared for the play to be different, and were obliged to suspend their instincts of judgement as well as their demands for pleasure. They knew they had forfeited their rights over the actors, and instead felt privileged to witness them. It was the actors who commanded them to see, and they crowded round each other to see better, breaking the conventions of normal witnessing. It was they who made judgements. It was they who came as innocents to the imaginative world. Malmivaara insisted they came to the art this way, disarmed.[220]

Barker's description of Malmivaara's approach appears to highlight a metaphorical method toward shaping audience expectations. As if to say the pain incurred by the audience in maintaining physical proximity to the work might help them to internalize and better understand themes in the play. This production definitely inspires the imagination; however, it does raise questions of practicality. For example, anyone who has attempted to perform in an unconventional theatre space knows of all the rules and regulations that must be addressed to ensure audience safety. Beyond the permits, the logistics

---

[220] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 63.

of finding and then functioning within the kind of environment described above calls for great resources -- personnel, time, and money, to name the most obvious ones. Finally, concerning the plays, Barker's language and complexity of content demand intense auditory concentration on the part of the audience, can this be achieved in such a physically fluid environment? Concerning this matter, director, Will Zaichkowski had the following to say:

> I think it is very important for an audience to start off somewhere comfortable, and that the audience should be active intellectually but not physically. I think being active physically would get in the way of an audience being able to work intellectually. The audience should be physically passive. As soon as you start moving the audience around there is the risk of people talking with each other, talking about the experience while it is still happening, developing a larger social vision of the experience, not to mention, causing all kinds of interference for the actors, etc..[221]

How one goes about creating the tension in the theatre during a Barker play seems to be a matter of individual choice, as endorsed by the playwright. For the purposes of this study, it is important to establish that the unconventional content of Barker's plays are presented to the audience through unconventional forms. It is important for a practitioner of this work to appreciate that an audience used to convention, especially in dramatic forms, will assume the empowered role intended by Barker if adequately prepared for their experience.

---

[221] Will Zaichkowski, ..see Appendix Two... page?

The focus on the role of the audience in the Theatre of Catastrophe lends itself to Bennett's study of audience reception because it recognizes the importance of audience awareness of how theatre and other media are constructed. Concerning her two-frame model, in the outer frame, practitioners and audience alike are made aware of the cultural elements which create and inform a theatrical event. While the inner frame entails all that occurs as a part of a dramatic production in a particular playing space. The audience's role is carried between these two frames and, perhaps more importantly, at their points of intersection. It is the interactive relations between audience and stage, spectator and spectator, which constitute production and reception, and which cause the inner and outer frames to converge for the creation of a particular theatrical experience.[222]

In Bennett's view the audience is an interpretive community which brings to the theatre a horizon of expectations, shaped by many factors occurring before the staged performance begins. As Herbert Blau describes it, "an audience without a history is not an audience."[223] The 'history' constitutes the outer frame, and is confirmed by the

---

[222] Bennett, Theatre Audiences 148-160.

[223] Herbert Blau, "Odd, Anonymous Needs: The Audience in a Dramatized Society," Performing Arts Journal 10.1 (1987): 35.

existence of commonly acknowledged theatrical conventions. The subversion of these conventions is the first challenge to practitioners of the Theatre of Catastrophe. At the centre of the inner frame is the combination and succession of visual and aural signs which the audience receives and interprets, some fixed but the majority of them in flux, and which signify on a number of possible denotative and connotative levels. From this the audience is better able to grasp the existence of the particular fictional world, with its own dynamic and governing rules.

Concerning the influence patterns between seating area, audience, and stage, Keir Elam has established a theory of proxemic relations in the performance space which illuminate these rules. Briefly, this theory works to prove that use of space is governed by rules which generate a range of connotative cultural units. Elam divides proxemic relations into three main syntactic systems (fixed-feature, semi-fixed-feature, and informal space):

> Fixed-feature space involves, broadly, static architectural configurations. In the theatre it will relate chiefly to the playhouse itself and, in formal theatres (opera houses, proscenium-arch theatres, etc.) to the shapes and dimensions of stage and auditorium. Semi-fixed-feature space concerns such moveable but non- dynamic objects as furniture, and so in theatrical terms involves the set, auxiliary factors like the lighting and, in informal theatrical spaces, stage and auditorium arrangements. The third proxemic mode, informal space, has as its units the ever-shifting relations of proximity and distance between individuals, thus applying, in the theatre, to actor-actor, actor-

spectator and spectator-spectator interplay.[224]

Elam's research has shown contemporary western audiences are greatly accustomed to fixed stage-auditorium relationships, and the predominance of this convention has led to the necessity for a comfortable theatrical experience.[225] The predominant architectural design of theatres -- a foyer which encourages observing and observation in the small, familiar groups in which the public attends the theatre, and an auditorium which assures anonymity (and thus reassurance) in the larger collective -- has thus been translated by theatre audiences into psychological need. Elam notes that, while the spectator surrenders his individual status upon entering the auditorium,

> he has his own well-marked private space, individual seat, and relative immunity from physical contact with his fellow audience members. The result is to emphasize personal rather than social perception and response.[226]

Elam's observation identifies the value accorded to the individual and his/her privacy in bourgeois culture. While most oppositional theatre practitioners attempt to break up this privacy by eroding personal space with collective action, Barker tries to destroy the comfort of this space. Beginning with his play texts, from the inner frame of the audiences' reception, he undermines the conventions which support the

---

[224] Elam 62-3.

[225] Elam 64.

[226] Elam 64-5.

individual as a comfortable spectator.

In this light, the dramaturgical reasons for Barker championing Malmivaara's directorial approach to Scenes from an Execution are clear. The physical demands made upon the audience are meant to thwart their psychological need for comfortable convention. Barker's texts establish an inner frame which challenges an audiences' habit of decoding stage action, and once their assumptions have be foiled they are obliged to find new ways of decoding what they have experienced. In questioning the habits and conventions which make up their horizon of expectations, the second frame of reception is activated. An audience's attention is not held by the surface reality of the play, or the illusion created by the inner frame, as is the case in naturalistic plays, rather by necessity to read beyond this reality. The overt theatricality (i.e. spectacle) of the Theatre of Catastrophe provokes the audience and keeps them engaged while they question their reliance on conventional theatrical elements like plot and character, in the inner frame, which lead to broader questions concerning the outer frame.

An audience which may become accustomed to decoding and questioning in the theatre may do so on other forms of 'constructed' media; especially since the characters in most Barker plays undergo similar discoveries, gaining awareness that may arouse the same in a member of the audience. As Barker's characters experience catastrophe and are forced to

instinctually recreate their bonds to each other and the world, the audience is shown that the conventions and structures which support society are constructed. Politics, history, economics, and other structures of our world are seen to be finite and false alongside an individual's instinct.

Not surprisingly, in order to perform instinct in a character, an actor must summon instinctual resources. Ian McDiarmid, a consummate actor of Barker's plays, describes his instinctual approach:

> My approach is impressionistic. Acting, for me, is not about building a character. I try to let the play 'act' on me, to open myself to its echoes, its possibilities. Howard Barker writes what I need to act; not deliberately, he just does it, and I seize on it - ravenously...He sees the power of the imagination as the supreme liberating force. It makes him unpopular with many political and critical schools of thought.[227]

McDiarmid and Barker meet in their joint belief in the power of the spoken word. Language meets instinct when the text demands an actor find the desire and feeling in a word like 'love' which has been generalized and over-romanticized to the point of denigration in public discourse. The text allows an actor to discover the character through language; almost as if it were the precondition for the act of becoming aware of oneself as a distinct entity.[228] As McDiarmid explains,

---

[227] David Ian Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire (London: MacMillan, 1989) 281.

[228] Ian McDiarmid's description of performing Barker's language elicits comparisons with the theories of language

> The language prevents you from generalizing, overlaying and taking refuge in a spurious naturalism. Words throb, like beats of the heart: they contain energy and they pulsate, you have to find them in, and let them pulsate through you, embody them and colour them...[229]

Barker's language lends the actor instinctual licence, to delve below the conventions and structured images of the theatre and society, to express both the actor's and the audience's pain and anger. An actor in the Theatre of Catastrophe must "choose the public place to be unpublic in."[230]

Barker's characters explicitly reveal their layers of philosophical, sexual, instinctive reality; the impulses which are conventionally and naturalistically consigned to subtext. Often actors find that these impulses are contradictory, coming through in their character all at once. Attempting to work through a Barker character logically or using naturalistic methods will not work as actress, Penny Downie explains,

> the questions 'who am I, what is my process' are useless. With Ann [from The Castle], you are a

---

espoused by Jacques Lacan, who believed "knowledge of the world, of others and of self is determined by language."

Madan Sarup, An Introductory Guide To Post-structuralism and Postmodernism (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988) 9.

[229] Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire 283.

[230] Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire 285.

> walking set of contradictions, which *create* your character. It's not logical, it's very, very dangerous. Unless you've got danger - which is sexual energy onstage, to me - you're depriving an audience. To me, the most important thing is a character's sexuality, and therefore the way they think, it's extraordinarily dangerous. Your character becomes the sum total of the contradictions within it - you *are* your contradictions, you're *not* your logic - because if you always know how you're going to react to any given situation, you may as well just telephone it in![231]

The subversion of logic is a familiar principle of the Theatre of Catastrophe as was thoroughly demonstrated through the signification strategies applied to The Last Supper, in the last chapter. Actors learn to delve beneath the false assurances of social constructions like logic and reason, finding more innate impulses like sexuality to act from. Not surprisingly this kind of impulsive freedom appeals to many actors because this was one of the reasons they decided to become an actor in the first place.

Many actors have responded to the disruptive rhythms of Barker's work. Similar to the associative and disruptive signification strategy seen in The Last Supper, the narrative jumps in these texts represent a liberating experience for actors and are often compared with Shakespeare. Discussing his approach to Barker's plays, actor Paul Freeman speaks about performing associative and disruptive pictures:

> the plays are sometimes obscure until you start working on them. They're wonderfully constructed plays, it's just that there are deliberate gaps in

---

[231] Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire 258.

> the narrative - which is a quality of the plays. As an actor, you have to ignore that. In No End of Blame, the question arises, what do you do about aging from Bela at 18 to him as an old man? The answer is really to ignore it and just play that scene, then try and make the next one absolutely different. Actors should always do that, but few plays force you to make that journey - whereas, you should always be coming in on a different note, like the play itself.[232]

Freeman has done much of his training with the Joint Stock Theatre Company, well known for their collective collaborations with playwrights Caryl Churchill and David Hare. Through Joint Stock Freeman has developed a strong political consciousness, as most of the company's work has a central political function. Although this sounds antithetical to Barker, Freeman has found a political foundation in Barker's texts, and his discovery illuminates Bennett's two-frame model:

> For me, what carries you through is the political element: you have to know the politics of each moment: *why* Howard has written what he has, *what* he wants to say at *that* moment. You ask what do the events of this scene mean for this society, and make that as clear as you can. You can subvert the play if you indulge in characterisation too much.[233]

Acting Barker involves what Leopold in The Europeans terms acting "the insecurity of all order."[234] He realizes that

---

[232] Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire 260.

[233] Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire 262.

[234] Howard Barker, The Europeans (London: Calder, 1990) 9.

actors have the power to make people collude with banality or to encourage them to oppose it. Barker's politics have made him suspicious of collective endeavours; he has seen them too often turn into institutions with institutionalized thought. In theatre he has attempted to use a cultural institution to nurture a vision of life; in form and content The Theatre of Catastrophe provokes its practitioners and audience alike to break the enforced myopia society tolerates. It asks the public to be open to the art of the actor, articulated here by Ian McDiarmid:

> [Where] [s]trength and weakness, good and evil, are forever bumping into each other. There's a joy and release in finding out what you are, for all the pain involved in being forced to consider the totality of the body and the self.[235]

RITUAL IN THE THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE — ENTERTAINMENT, EFFICACY, and EDUCATION:

Barker makes many demands of his audience and his medium. The Theatre of Catastrophe's aesthetic requires a cycle in which meaning is created and recreated between Barker, his practitioners, and his audience. In this respect, an effort to develop an artistic vision may be sustained from many perspectives in the theatre. In The Possibilities, images of profound personal difference, pain, and love are found in the series of ten plays. The plays take both actor and audience through an exploration of change; as David Ian Rabey

---

[235] Rabey, Howard Barker: Politics and Desire 286.

explains, this is a difficult experience for audience and actor alike because it entails

> a dynamic that rips people out of their former selves, more alive but raw and bleeding, and impels them into a journey through uncharted territory where things and persons are constantly on the verge of turning into their supposed opposites.[236]

As from becomes content in experiential terms, The Possibilities and The Last Supper oblige the audience to contemplate personal identity and discover creativity on new terms which come into conflict with the existing habits and conventions that constrain an individual's imagination. In The Last Supper, Barker offers the audience an opportunity to question their individual and collective immersion in religion, and deconstruct the structures of insecurity forged by society around spiritual faith.

Despite the positive questions being asked by the Theatre of Catastrophe, and the provocative way in which they are posed within the plays, questions still arise concerning the development of an audience for Barker's plays. For instance, how may contemporary western societies embrace Barker's aesthetic, especially when the processes of capitalism and market economies have deemed the theatre as a marketplace where entertainment may be bought? Moreover, when the public is long used to a passive role as purchaser of pleasure or entertainment, how may the Theatre of Catastrophe

---

[236] Rabey, "Introduction," 9.

develop a desire for them to become active in the performance process that demands they make informed choices about what they have experienced?

Dorrian Lambley, in her article entitled "In Search of a Radical Discourse for Theatre", defines radical theatre as that which questions the power structures in society: "avoiding dogmatic and factional associations while reasserting the need for vigorous and fundamental change."[237] Her notion of radical theatre seems to coincide with many of Barker's theories. She claims the focus of attention in radical theatre are with those who resist power, alongside the question of why there may be a '*desire*' to do so.[238] In the Theatre of Catastrophe, Barker attempts to introduce a theory of subject and desire -- that which resists power and why.

Lambley claims that this is an important ingredient for a radical theatre for the following reasons:

> In the art of the theatre, the object of desire finds its focus in the body, the suffering, energetic, and libidinal body, the subject of society: the individual who experiences the social - the public - as private.[239]

Lambley's perspective is reminiscent of anthropologist, Victor Turner's description of the ritual connection between social

---

[237] Dorrian Lambley, "In Search of a Radical Discourse for Theatre," New Theatre Quarterly 29 (February 1992): 34.

[238] Lambley 41.

[239] Lambley 41.

drama (experiences in everyday life) and aesthetic drama (staged performance). Briefly, he has found what he calls the 'anthropology of experience' to be a way of abolishing the sharp distinction between the classical study of culture (e.g. theatre) and sociobiology (e.g. anthropology). For Turner, Lambley's Radical Theatre is called 'True Theatre' and he describes it the following way:

> True theatre is experience of heightened vitality...[A]t its height signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. When this happens in a performance, there may be produced in audience and actors alike what d'Aquili and Laughlin (1979: 177) call in reference to both ritual and meditation a 'brief ecstatic state and sense of union...Theatre best of all exemplifies Thomas Hardy's dictum: 'If a way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst.' Ritual or theatrical transformation can scarcely occur otherwise. Problems and obstacles (the 'crisis' stage of social dramas) challenge our brain's neurobiology into full arousal, and culture supplies that aroused activity with a store of preserved social experiences which can be 'heated up' to supply the current hunger for meaning with reliable nutrients.[240]

Turner's hunger is synonymous with Lambley's desire, and both express the importance for the subject to experience the collective event of theatre in an individual way, through a transformation of sorts, be it physical, emotional or intellectual. Both theories of theatre demonstrate the need for an individual audience member's endurance of problems,

---

[240] Victor Turner, "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?" By Means Of Performance, eds. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 13.

obstacles or suffering of the subject in order to find meaning in the event.

In many respects, Barker's description of his theatre is similar to rituals performed in communities around the world.

He is attempting to create a theatre with a stronger influence toward efficacious (ritualistic) transformation in his audience. Returning to Barker's description of Juha Malmivaara's production of Scenes from an Execution, though the event has entertaining aspects, its ritualistic efficacy is prominent:

> In one scene he [Malmivaara] placed the audience in prison with the actor. In pure darkness he obliged them to experience at least one aspect of incarceration. Then, from a distance of a hundred yards, the light of a lantern came. The relief of this light was a metaphor of hope. The audience trusted Malmivaara, whilst being uncertain what he would do with them next. This tension was the best condition for viewing the plays of Barker.
>
> He knew the importance of difficulty in art and the repulsiveness of easy art. The difficulty of the text he counterpointed in the difficulty of the situation. But he did not fail to reward the audience. He gave them, above all, beauty. For their effort he rewarded them with things they had never seen before, just as the text insisted on things that had not been exposed before. He knew in theatre each production must give what cannot be reproduced in any other medium....The Audience felt privileged. In an ordinary theatre they would have though such things merely their due.[241]

Barker's description of Malmivaara's production is similar in tone to anthropological descriptions of rituals where a shaman

---

[241] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 63-64.

leads a devout following into a sacred enactment. As the audience participates, they move into an unpredictable experience where faith and belief in the process becomes ever important. Barker felt that this production was a testament to the sacrifices an audience will make for art; the pain they are willing to share with the performers. Significant to this ritualistic atmosphere was the sense that the audience was relieved of prior knowledge of the event, and the authority that comes with their certainty of theatrical convention. This translates to the physical arrangement of the performance space, as Barker mentions: "He [Malmivaara] took control from them, and gave it to the actors. They dominated the audience, who were not raked above them like delegates."[242] This brings up a final ritualistic tendency of the Theatre of Catastrophe, Barker praises the ability of Malmivaara's production to disorient the audience to such an extent that their critical faculties are suspended until they have experienced the entire production. Like ritual, criticism is discouraged -- until after the performance. In this respect Barker's intension is that the audience will endure the full transformative affect of the production -- they will hear the entire argument in all its complexity -- before passing criticism.

CRITICAL ORIENTATION OF THE THEATRE OF CATASTROPHE:

---

[242] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 64.

Two important links exist between ritual and theatre that may help to foster a stronger cultural presence for the Theatre of catastrophe. The first is spectacle. As Barker's plays subvert conventional means for audiences to approach the work, they must be engaged by alternate means, and all of these are linked by offering them an experience which affects them deeply and unexpectedly. As discussed, the craft of the actor, the performance space, and the preparation of an audience's horizon of expectations all play an important part in creating a cultural event which offers its public something which can not be experienced elsewhere. The second link involves education. Aside from the enticing qualities of spectacle, how may an audience be attracted and nurtured to demand the challenge to their views and values, established in the Theatre of Catastrophe. Although Barker has established his own company for production of his plays called The Wrestling School, they are an organisation in constant need of financial support. Their exclusive performance of Barker's play is not economically viable in the market-driven theatre communities which exist in almost all of the western countries. Perhaps a stronger link with educational institutions. Conceivably the two cultural institutions might enhance one another.

In Northrop Frye's essay, "The Critical Discipline", he outlines the significant relationship of the liberal arts to education. Like Barker's theatre, the university for Frye

demands, first of all, that the student recognize and accept a dialectic between his/her social environment and a cultural environment which crosses it, so to speak, at right angles. He points out that a student must understand what s/he must do to live in society, and this should have been provided by primary and secondary educational institutions; beyond this, post-secondary education must demonstrate that society has no criteria able to intellectually judge itself or one's actions within it. The criteria (the secular criteria) can come only from the arts and sciences, or as he states, "the co-ordinated vision of the greatness and accuracy of human imagination and thought."[243]

The theoretical model of education laid out by Frye has its apotheosis at the university level. Frye's plan for the university is reminiscent of Barker's apotheosis in the Theatre of Catastrophe. Frye outlines the pedagogical steps toward the university cultural goal as follows:

> In primary education only the surface of learning, the acquiring of information and skills, is ordinarily visible; in secondary education, social opinions and attitudes begin to come into view. In the university the basis of the whole structure appears, in the form of a vision of what the world is in comparison with the higher society of art and science which shows us what humanity can do, the society that (Matthew) Arnold called culture. The university is thus a kind of social laboratory in which the most revolutionary conceptions may be valuable, not necessarily as programmes for action, but as insights into the structure of society,

---

[243] Northrop Frye, "The Critical Discipline," On Education (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990) 32.

nature, or the human mind.[244]

Here we have a premise similar to that of Barker when he describes the Theatre of Catastrophe the following way:

> The actor's skill, the writer's invention, together release the mind of the observer from the blockage of unfreedom which is characterized in the feeling 'I don't know what this is about, therefore I reject it'. Instead the writer and the actor conspire to lure the mind into the unknown, the territory of possible changed perception... I believe in a society of increasingly restricted options that a creative mind owes it to his fellow human beings to stretch himself and them, to give others the right to be amazed, the right even to be taken to the limits of tolerance and to strain and test morality at its source.[245]

In their visions, Frye and Barker see the university and theatre as a place where culture is explored and enriched. Asking questions not attempted in society, they become a place where the public may demand more from its facilitators (writers, professors, actors, etc.), and will itself set the pace for change. Only when this public is insisting on change can these cultural institutions be considered successful.

As with education, to discuss the practical or theoretical nature of contemporary theatre it is necessary to begin from the state of public knowledge. Only from a judgement of public knowledge, its sickness or vitality, may the necessary forms of theatre be deduced.[246] It is the role of the Theatre of Catastrophe to offer a stimulus for a

---

[244] Frye 32.

[245] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 34-5.

[246] Barker, Arguments For A Theatre 88.

ferment of thought and discovery. It endeavours to see beyond the cliche and stock response of society to the ever-changing political, economic, and social circumstances in which we live. It is a theatre which upholds the radical dynamic of democracy which tells us that ordinary society is expendable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barker, Howard. Arguments for a Theatre. London: Calder, 1989.

_____. Crimes in Hot Countries (also Fair Slaughter). London: Calder, 1978.

_____. Lullabies for the Impatient. London: Calder, 1988.

_____. No End of Blame. London: Calder, 1981.

_____. Stripwell and Claw. London: Calder, 1977.

_____. That Good Between Us, Cridentials of a Sympathiser. London: Calder, 1980.

_____. The Castle and Scenes from an Execution. London: Calder, 1985.

_____. The Hang of the Gaol. London: Calder, 1981.

_____. The Last Supper. London: Calder, 1988.

_____. "The Triumph in Defeat." The Guardian 22 Aug. 1988.

Bennett, Susan. Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception. London: Routledge, 1990.

Billington, Michael. Guardian 27 Feb. 1988.

Boal, Augusto. Theatre of the Oppressed. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.

Braun, Edward. The Director and the Stage. London: Methuen, 1982.

Courtney, Richard. Drama and Intelligence. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990.

Donesky, Finlay. "Oppression, Resistance, and the Writer's Testament." New Theatre Quarterly 8 (Summer 1986): 336-344.

Dukore, Bernard F., ed.. Dramatic Theory and Criticism. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.

Dunn, Tony. "Howard Barker: Socialist Playwright for Our Times." Gambit 41. London: Calder, 1984.

_____. "Interview with Howard Barker." Gambit 41. London: Calder, 1984.

_____. "Massacre of the Culpable." Plays and Players (Oct. 1984): 13-15.

Edgar, David. "Putting Politics on Stage." New Socialist. (Nov./Dec. 1981): 52-63.

Ford, John. "Claw...." Plays and Players. (Nov. 1975): 39-40.

Frye, Northrop. On Education. Marham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990.

_____. The Great Code. Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982.

Gatti, Armand. "Armand Gatti on Time, PLace and the Theatrical Event." Tans. Nancy Oakes. Modern Drama 25.1: 69-81.

Grant, Steve. "Barker's Bite." Plays and Players. (Nov. 1975): 36-39.

Hartnoll, Phyllis, ed.. The Oxford Companion to the Theatre. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Itzin, Catherine. Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968. London: Methuen, 1980.

Klotz, Gunther. "Howard Barker: Paradigm of Postmodernism." New Theatre Quarterly 25 (Feb. 1991): 20-26.

Lepage, Robert. "Theatre of the Miraculous." Saturday Night 32:9 (Jan. 1989): 32-39, 42.

Lambley, Dorrian. "In Search of a Radical Discourse for Theatre." New Theatre Quarterly 29 (Feb. 1992): 34-47.

McAllister, J.F.O.. "Atrocity and Outrage." Time. 140:7 (17 Aug. 1992): 3, 16-20.

McDiarmid, Ian. "Howard Barker: A Personal View." Gambit 41. London: Calder, 1984.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. Beyond Good and Evil. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Viking Penguin Inc., 1988.

O'Farrell, Claire. Foucault. London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1989.

Pavis, Patrice. "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre." Modern Drama 29:1 (1986): 1-22.

Pfister, Manfred. The Theory and Analysis of Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Postman, Neil. Amusing Ourselves To Death. New York: Penguin, 1975.

Rabey, David Ian. Howard Barker: Politics of Desire. London: MacMillan, 1989.

Sarup, Madan. An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988.

Schechner, Richard and Willa Appel, eds.. By Means of Performance:Intercultural studies of theatre and ritual. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Williams, Raymond. Keywords. London: Fontana, 1988.

APPENDIX ONE

INTERVIEW WITH ALAN EDWARDS, DIRECTOR OF THE POSSIBILITIES

AUGUST 1989, THE EDMONTON FRINGE THEATRE FESTIVAL

Andrew Houston: In directing this play for a fringe festival, your production is one of many happening at the same time, what kind of unique experience did you want your audience to have with The Possibilities?

Alan Edwards: As a cast we did spend a lot of time talking about what the play meant to us, and what we were offering an audience. And I think we agreed that the play was engaging the audience in a specific relationship which I had never seen before, or have ever seen since, this production.

For me, one of the things Barker is doing in this play is offering eight -- well in my case eight[247] -- moral tales, and they are didactic tales. I did spend about a half a year thinking about my approach to this play. My first thoughts were along the lines of maybe I should get a cartoon-like professor with an easel and the various scene titles. His manner would be like: "*The Unforseen Consequences of a Patriotic Act*, now pay attention!" But then I thought well Brecht did that sort of thing forty-five years ago, and what is to be gained from doing it again. But having said that, for me the impulse behind each of the scenes is like that. For example, each of them are asking a question like the cartoon professor, like what are the unforseen consequences of a patriotic act? It seems that by the way Barker titles his scenes he is asking for this kind of association.

A.H.: The titles make each scene sound like a parable.

A.E.: Yeah in a way, like the 'rabbit and the hare', 'how the turtle discovered the ocean' or something like that. They seem to be like little episodes designed to show you something about life. And I approached each scene with this kind of understanding, but recognizing all the while that the company were never going to get to the position were we would be able to say: "Well, the unforseen consequences of a patriotic act

---

[247] In Alan Edward's production of The Possibilities he cut two of the scenes, *The Philosophical Lieutenant and the Three Village Women* and *The Dumb Woman's Ecstasy*.

are...insanity, pain, poverty, etc."

A.H.: Right. So your production tried to leave those conclusions up to the audience?

A.E.: Yes, and the audience should be left to grab what they will from each scene, and that may be different from spectator to spectator. So if one hundred and fifty people saw the show there might be one hundred and fifty different interpretations of what we were trying to say.

A.H.: This play, then, is very different from your previous work where you've had a specific political message.

A.E.: Absolutely. Yes, and this was a much more challenging project for this reason. As you've noticed I'm a 'message' kind of director, to me it's important that the theatre has important things to say. In a sense I found this in The Possibilities where in effect we said to the audience: "Take a look at morality in these extreme situations, and what answers can you come up with?" I personally feel that we live in these extreme situations and I know that a lot of people like to ignore this. For example, we live in a highly toxic world wherein people make moral compromises everyday for the sake of convenience or in the pursuit of making money. We do make extreme choices that have extreme effects although most people see them as trivial. Barker wants to push us to this recognition but he hasn't provided the answers, or the last part of the moral.

Each scene of the play seems to provide circumstance, and the actors show the situation that arises from this circumstance, but then it's up to the audience to question the choices made by the actors in each situation as if it were happening to them. For instance, in *Kiss My Hands*, the audience must consider if they would have let the desperate people into their house. Was it morally the right thing to do but socially the wrong thing, or vice versa? Or politically disastrous but morally right? It's up to the actors and the audience to carve up the situation and ask themselves questions. In our production I think it was clear that the actors were having a hard time with the work and they were able to convey this to the audience, as if to say, "hey, we're working on this stuff and so should you because these experiences are important to consider.

A.H.: It's interesting when you say that the play addresses the extreme world in which we live. Would you say that Barker is showing us an accurate picture of our world in this play?

A.E.: He certainly doesn't show us a realistic picture. It

seems to me that the situations in each of the scenes are suitably removed from reality - or freed from any immediately recognizable context -And Barker makes a point of doing this. I believe this is his approach because he wants to keep the more politically active members of his audience from prejudging the conflicts they see on stage into political contexts they are familiar with, and thereby stop paying attention to what's happen on stage.

Although Barker makes us consider our morality in a somewhat abstract environment, all of these scenes seem to come down to issues that we have to deal with in our lives, whether they are priorities or not. For example, in the Bookseller's scene (*Only Some Can Take The Strain*) he is dealing with ideas and art in our society, along with the censorship which often delineates them. The scene asks us to consider what is the process by which we have access to ideas and art, in a threatening environment.

A.H.: In that scene in particular there are many choices open to the audience concerning the issue of censorship and the artist - or in this case the purveyor of art - and much of this has to do with the supreme uncertainty of the Bookseller as a character. One moment he seems to me as being righteous, the next he's a jerk.

A.E.: Yes, that's the beauty of that character. When the audience first meets him it seems easy to label him as a quack, but as the scene goes on he proves himself to be far more intelligent than that.

A.H.: How did you prepare the actors for such complexity in this character and the others?

A.E.: Well, the choices were the actors, and I certainly didn't come into this project with all of the answers. I think I answered the approach but where that would take any individual scene was up to the actors. I knew where I wanted to go, and every time we finished rehearsing a scene I would always come back to what I saw as the larger context. We would always come back to questions like, "What are the unforseen consequences of a patriotic act?" It seemed important when doing this play to always step back and look at the larger context and see if we were addressing the presentation of the play's moral issues in the right way.

A.H.: So that the audience could make the moral?

A.E.: Right, in this case the audience is the completion of the moral issues presented.

A.H.: How did your actors respond to the language of the play?

A.E.: Well, one of the first things I impressed upon the actors was the importance of language in Barker's work. At the fringe, it's not uncommon to see a couple of Shakespearean plays done where the language has been absolutely murdered, and I realize that inattentiveness to a play's language can absolutely ruin a performance. So, with this show we spent a fair amount of time on text work. With The Possibilities the work's pace, its impact and vitality on stage are almost entirely bound up in its language. I think everyone in the cast appreciated the vast landscape which Barker's language had presented for us to traverse in producing the play.

A.H.: From the director's perspective, is there some aspect of the language in this play which offered a unique approach to your audience.

A.E.: Actually from my experience I think an overly studious approach to the language offered some traps. In rehearsal there came a time with all of the scenes where, I couldn't identify the shifts and complexities in the language for the actors, they just had to do it for themselves. It became an intuitive process for them, and eventually we just worked and worked each scene until they had made choices and found the action which the language fully reinforced.

A.H.: In your production you left out two scenes, *The Philosophical Lieutenant and The Three Village Women* and *The Dumb Woman's Ecstasy*. Why did you decide to do this?

A.E.: Well concerning *The Philosophical Lieutenant*, this scene was dealing with arguments I felt were already dealt with in other scenes, so that for me that scene was redundant. For example, an exploration of power and sexual love, under similar circumstances occurs in *She Sees the Argument But* and *Not Him*. Also, I found this scene to contain arguments which for me were very predictable and boring when compared with the other scenes. As for *The Dumb Woman's Ecstasy*, the scene didn't present the audience with a moral choice, and therefore it didn't fit what I was trying to establish for the play as a whole. I do like the way that scene 'turns the tables' between the Torturer and the Dumb Woman, one of his victims, but for my production it just didn't fit in. Also, with eight scenes the play certainly ended up being a long enough experience as it was.

A.H.: Did the fact that you were presenting the play at a fringe festival, where most plays are about an hour long, influence your decision to cut the play as well?

A.E.: Yes, definitely. Let's face it, quite often the Edmonton Fringe can be like a 'fast food' theatre festival, people moving from one course to the next. Before people have had any

time to think about one show they're in the line up for the next one. So, putting a play like The Possibilities into this kind of environment did require a couple of - not unreasonable - concessions on my part, and one was that it not be too long. Also, many of our shows were scheduled into the midnight time slot, so you had to consider what an audience would be capable of at 1:00 am and beyond.

A.H.: In terms of dealing with a cagey fringe audience, and the tactics used to confront them and attract them to the play. What kind of environment did you set up for the audience to come into?

A.E.: I wanted to incorporate a sense of intentionality into the production; that is, I always wanted the audience to be aware that this was a company of actors presenting a play. For instance, between scenes there was a half-light and the actor who had just been playing The Emperor would now be seen moving a flat, etc.. There was also a sense of intimacy at work. It was important that we not be aloof or distanced the way text had a threat of being. Another way of saying this is that we had to compensate in physical terms for an alienating tendency in the play's language. That's not to say that we didn't want the audience to be so intimate that they weren't intellectually engaged either; I guess what we were after was a balance between the two.

With regards to setting, we always tried to locate things within a fairly generic environment. In most scenes we just used props that were necessary, for instance, the shopping cart and books for the bookseller in *Only Some Can Take The Strain*. There were some small set changes between the earlier scenes, but by the last few we wanted to really pick up the pace, so less was being moved around. Overall, I think our approach was to make the actor's body the set.

In terms of pacing in the play I think a minimalistic approach to setting is necessary. The play has to have an increased momentum to show that it is driving towards an inevitability. The difference between this happening in The Possibilities versus any other play is that the inevitability of the action never occurs on stage. The inevitability in this case is the audience getting up and leaving at the end of the experience; to go out and ponder what they have just experienced.

A.H.: Your program had a very powerful logo, with sculls and armaments, and the production was subtitled "Theatre of War". What was your intention in giving the audience this first impression of the play?

A.E.: One of the things I responded to in the play was

Barker's paradoxical nature. His plays are poetic, refined, and beautiful in some respects, while at the same time they have a vile, ugly, and violent quality. These paradoxical qualities arose in our production. As generic as we tried to make each scene, the action always ended up emphasizing the ugly, violent side, while the langauge maintained the grace and beauty of the moment.

A.H.: Is Barker trying to remind us of the darker qualities found in human nature?

A.E.: I think so. He wants to show us that under extreme circumstances we are capable of some pretty horrible acts, no matter how civilized we think we have become in our society. This play deals with characters who find themselves in extreme situations, and this demands appropriate actions on the part of the actors portraying these characters.

Getting back to the program. I chose the image of Theatre of War because I've had that graphic for years and I always wanted to use it as a fringe poster. It speaks volumes to me: it's gritty, it's agit-prop., it's wild. At the same time, the program itself, is laser printed, it's clearly laid out, it contains some Barker quotes, and for the most part has a refined look on the inside. In this respect, the program has the same paradoxical nature as the play. Initially the play has the engaging quality of propaganda but then as each scene progresses it is up to the audience to follow it along to their own conclusions.

In a few of the scenes, the two which come to mind are *The Necessity for Prostitution in Advanced Societies* and *She Sees the Argument But*, we reinforced the propagandistic impact of the play by creating a kind of futuristic, fascist environment. As a part of the costumes of the 'official' characters in these scenes we gave them uniforms with the three-seven swastika of the Afrikana Resistance Movement in South Africa which is suitably enough removed from Edmontonians that the audience wouldn't have thought, is this set in South Africa, or what? And along with these costumes, we used a lot of red, black and other harsh tones in the colouring of the space. The music used was from a band called Liabach, and it has a very industrial, rhythmic, almost a Wagnerian quality which contributed to the fascist, forceful feel we wanted in the scenes. In fact, this sort of atmosphere even permeated our rehearsal process, for instance, at the beginning of many of our rehearsals Liabach's music would be played and the cast would perform a warm-up which included goose-stepping and physical, domination-type games. A lot of our improvisation around the script included isolating members of the cast and creating 'us versus them' kind of games. We wanted to explore some of the extreme sensations Barker

explores in the play. The end result in my opinion was that we ended up going further than Barker would be comfortable with in using political imagery in most facets of the production to assist with the environmental impact of the play.

A.H.: So you imagined a kind of political context for some of the scenes which you felt fuelled the play's impact.

A.E.: Basically this is what we did. For *The Necessity for Prostitution* scene I postulated a working class revolution in England as a context for this scene. This revolution would overthrow not Thatcherism but the even more vile descendants of Thatcherism, governing some time in the future. So the scene takes place many years in the future, and The Old Woman, who in our production had a strong Cockney accent, took part in this revolution. In the scene, The Old Woman is pondering over what went wrong in the revolution while in the presence of her decadent daughter, who has become a prostitute for The Party leaders. Also I imagined The Young Man, who comes looking for Magda, the daughter, to be a member of the new ruling class who have now taken over.

For a number of the scenes we imagined a similar kind of context which raised the stakes for our actors. We just said, "What if?" And certainly our audience had no stake dramatically in England sixty years from now so it shouldn't have violated the contextual openness Barker wanted, and for the cast it provided some provocative imagery to work with in each scene. Overall some of the costuming, setting, and sound we used helped me as a director to push the actors a greater distance emotionally with the work than I might've been able to otherwise.

A.H.: In terms of how you set your production up in the space, did you find a kind of transition in the use of space that reflects the movement of catastrophe from somewhere outside to within the domestic space?

A.E. Yes, the overall visceral thrust of <u>The Possibilities</u> seems to go from the madness of sensory bombardment to the extreme tension of silence. In the first scene (*The Weaver's Ecstasy*) we had all kinds of sound effects to convey the battle raging outside the home of the family, and the stage was very busy with the family's activity. In the last scene (*Not Him*) you could hear a pin drop, as the Liabach soundtrack became much quieter, and a visual intimacy was created with a tight spot of light on stage. Also you can't rehearse this play without noticing that fewer and fewer people are on stage, from beginning to end. Notwithstanding all of the connected qualities found from scene to scene, we still tried to isolate each one as much as possible, presenting them to the audience as distinct episodes.

A.H.: If you were to do this play again are there any significant approaches or methods that you used in this production which you would revise or do differently in a future show?

A.E.: First of all, I'd like to try the whole play; I'd like to have a production budget (a big laugh here). It would be nice to be the only show in the space that evening. I mean it would be nice to have an opportunity to produce this play as a normal production. One of the things we wanted to do but couldn't under fringe circumstances was to flood the stage with blood, as the text describes. In fact, the script asks for it twice and what I wanted to do was absolutely flood the stage with a ridiculous amount of blood. Of course in the fringe this would be a logistical nightmare, blood on the curtains, costumes, etc., and so we couldn't do it. When The Girl falls in this blood and drops the wool in it, we were able to colour the wool pretty well but it just wasn't the same kind of spectacle without the blood all over the floor. We tried to find this kind of spectacle in other aspects of our show but this instance was missed.

APPENDIX TWO

INTERVIEW WITH WILL ZAICHKOWSKI, DIRECTOR OF THE POSSIBILITIES

FEBRUARY 1991, THRUST THEATRE, U. OF ALBERTA

Andrew Houston: I'd like to start off by talking about the play's structure. Is there a reason for the ten plays being in the order they are in?

Will Zaichkowski: Yes. Originally I was thinking of changing the order, just to see what effect it would have, and what I found was, out of order, the play didn't have the same impact on a visceral level. It didn't feel right. Now that I've had some time to look at it and think about it I see that the play is a slow trip in turning domestic situations inside out. The first and last scenes are not possible without what we experience in the middle scenes, in the order they are presented. If you change the order, the last scene does not make sense.

He starts from a very realistic scene, *The Weaver's Ecstasy At The Discovery Of A New Colour*. They are in their house, a domestic space, and the force comes from outside. It's a foreign force, the soldiers invade the household, steal the rug, capture the daughter and murder the father. It's warfare and it's recognizable to the audience as the kind of ambush which often occurs during a war. The last scene, *Not Him*, also takes place in domestic setting and the warfare is coming from the outside, but in this case the conflict and catastrophe come from the inside of the domestic place. A woman eagerly awaits her husband's return from war, and once he has arrived she murders him while they make love. In this last scene the enemy is within, so, it's like the first scene turned inside out. Barker slowly takes you through this transition, a subversion of expectation, as you go through the play.

A.H.: Yes, that makes sense in terms of what Barker says about the Theatre of Catastrophe attempting to subvert audience expectations, and often doing so by taking them out of a domestic context or a realm of predictability.

W.Z.: Well, in this case, he also hits you in the territory where you are familiar. The first scene is a simple, almost naturalistic play setting. The second one (*Kiss My Hands*) as well, although the sense of catastrophe is starting to come

from the inside. The wife lets in the terrorists, but it still is reasonably comfortable territory - i.e., the terrorists are murderers who come to the house at night from outside. Then he takes you slowly out of comfortable territory into the totally unrecognizable, which is at the very end. The middle scenes in the play are Barker's attempt to gradually take you into the unknown of the last scene. It's like someone holding your hand and taking you through a maze they known, and you don't know where you are going, all you know is that you end up at a certain point. He takes you from the familiar in the first two scenes, develops your confidence to follow the work, and then in the last scene, leaves it up to the audience to figure out the rest of the way.

A.H.: Could this maze in the play be experience, like history for example, expressed in a different way than the audience is familiar with?

W.Z.: I think Barker uses a lot of archetypical images. It's a topic in my thesis on Shakespeare to argue that archetypes are in our time personal, and this may seem like a fallacy because once an archetype is no longer public, how can it be an archetype? Well, my feeling, and what I found in the work of Barker, is that we have a shared subconscious notion of archetypes, but what we identify as an archetype will be different for each person but it will always have somewhat of a familiarity from person to person. What we see today is that archetypes are much more universal and less specific - the way they were thousands of years ago. Back then everyone in a given society could agree on the image of a specific archetype, and nowadays we understand the substance of the archetype but identify with it separately. So, I think what Barker does is play into the subconscious knowledge of archetypes and provides an audience with the opportunity to find, explore and test their personal archetypes through his plays.

A.H.: So he's hoping for individual interpretation in the audience of his work. This seems like the basis for his idea that the Theatre of Catastrophe is an 'open theatre'; that is, open for individual interpretation.

Is this role of interpretation developed through subverting audience expectations?

W.Z.: I think so. For Barker the domestic setting is the place of realism and logic. However, even the scenes that take place outside of a domestic setting begin with a kind of realistic rationale, and this is because he wants to establish audience expectations which can then be broken through the catastrophic occurrence later in the scene. As you go through the scenes of the play - domestic setting or not - your expectations fall

shorter and shorter of what ends up happening in the scene. In this respect Barker will always subvert audience expectation.

By subverting audience expectation he gets the audience to really think for themselves about what is happening on stage. They have to be more involved because if you think you know what is going to happen on stage then you start predicting the outcome, and stop thinking about the work. As soon as you can no longer predict the outcome, then it becomes very important to listen and watch the entire scene. Also, a factor in Barker's subversion of expectation is that usually logic and reason have left the scene in lieu of spectacle and passion, so the audience can not simply think about the scene but are obliged to feel emotion about it.

A.H.: The Theatre of Catastrophe places great importance on subverting the intellect. The audience must explore solutions to questions which have eluded reason and logic in the past. Does Barker want us to explore new meaning in our lives through language?

W.Z.: I think you might be giving more credit to Barker than he deserves. It seems to me that his plays fit into the school of hyper-realism. That is to say being more real than real. I think his language is entirely real in its expression and it tries to provoke the audience to create a description of an event within their own heads.

A.H.: Isn't that the function of poetry?

W.Z.: Yes, but in Barker's case the language is very functional. The way it is broken up, the typography of it.

A.H.: In your production I know you spent a lot of time working on language with the actors, so let's talk about that. When you say that Barker's language is functional and yet it's poetic, aren't we speaking about metaphor here?

W.Z.: Its function is to convey the contents, or description, of a metaphor to the audience. This is bound up in the actor's approach. Once you know the state of the character, the state of the scene; once you know the possibilities for the definition of survival, that determines how the language is spoken. The language in and of itself is useless, it relies on the world outside - the world of the audience - to bring to it significance.

When you read Barker quietly to yourself it's quite possible not to understand it at all. This was my experience anyway. But, as soon as you read it aloud and as soon as you start defining what the experience is the language then starts to serve the experience. Based upon what happened in rehearsal

developing The Possibilities for production, we found that the only way the language works is with a knowledge of the experience. Now there may be many experiences a company may have with this play, the only ones I know are those we came across in our production.

A.H.: Barker seems to encourage different cultural experiences of his plays, he's open to this.

W.Z.: Certainly, if I were directing this production in Poland, I would've had a totally different experience with what the actors there would've brought to the play. As soon as a company gives the play an experience, the language begins to serve that experience.

A.H.: Does that 'experience' entail situating the play in any specific place?

W.Z.: Barker makes a point of not putting the scenes of The Possibilities in any clear context. His plays are very theatrical in that they are largely made up of imagination.

A.H.: And you liberate this imagination implicit in the text by leaving the context up to the audience, thereby enabling them to use their imagination as well.

W.Z.: Yes, and I think this is a very good thing, the last thing you want to do in any theatre is anchor your audience into a particular point of view. As soon as you offer them an intellectual proposition, they can respond in one of two ways: yes or no. They can agree with you and go on with you, or they can abandon you. I think what Barker tries to do in his later work is abandon intellectual causes and intellectual statements. He tries to pursue something deeper and wants the audience to do the same.

What I see in a play like The Last Supper, for instance, is Barker getting a bit preachy with his characters; however, what the play says is not intellectual or rational, it's very emotional. He is very interested in the experience which happens in the theatre -it begins and ends there - and what any individual does with that experience or takes away from it is totally up to them. He's very much interested in instant posterity - what occurs at the moment in the theatre.

A.H.: It's up to the audience...

W.Z.: Yes, and I don't think he has any specific agenda in mind for what the audience takes away. I think he's much more concerned with what the audience experiences.

A.H.: By way of discussing audience experiences, I'd like to move on now to the relationship your show established with the audience. Your production occurred on the Thrust Stage, which is a pretty rigid space to work within. Originally you had a number of designs and drawings laid out in an effort to try and place the action all around the space, in the audience, balconies, doorways, etc. In the end you decided to stage the show quite conventionally. What happened there?

W.Z.: Well, originally I wanted to place the action in the seating area, and put the audience on the stage.

A.H.: Why?

W.Z.: Well, it falls under the heading of 'good idea', and my feeling about good ideas are that they should be packaged, put away, and never used again. Good ideas only ever serve themselves. That staging idea certainly wouldn't have served the play. It would have imposed something on the play, and given it a feel which I began to think wouldn't have worked. Instead I went with the simplest approach I could make work.

A.H.: Yes, that's what you ended up with. For example, the lighting used was white, harsh, and laboratory-like. From where I sat in the Thrust I felt like I was examining the actors demonstrating an experiment for me. Especially that they were presenting me with arguments.

W.Z.: Well, it's hard to encourage intimacy in that space. So, I really tried to isolate the playing space. I wanted to make it very clear that there was no relationship between what was going on stage and what was going on in the audience. I wanted an objective distance.

A.H.: Yes, this is what I felt occurred, and it reminded me of Brecht's Verfrumdungseffekt. Why did you want this objective distance between audience and activity on stage?

W.Z.: Because I felt it was important to avoid audience identification. This stands true for most of the plays I direct, but it really came to the fore with Barker. With <u>The Possibilities</u>, as soon as you identify with a character in a specific scene then you start missing things in the scene because you've taken a singular perspective within it. I wanted the audience to have a complete perspective of the play, to see it as an event which occurred as opposed to having them get into the play and side with a particular character within the event.

This works well with Barker's characters in that none of them are victims. He doesn't write characters that the audience will feel pity or sympathy for, and we tried to play

the characters with this in mind. This was all a part of creating a formal distance between actor and audience, and saying "these characters are not you people." "These are a group of actors, upon a stage, performing a play."

Actually with our production we probably could have gone much further in distancing the audience. If I were to do it again I wouldn't have blackouts between scenes. With the lights up all the time, there would be a constant recognition by the audience that they were in a theatre. In our show I felt it necessary to give the audience a bit of a comfort zone by blacking out between scenes. Given another chance, however, I would take the risk and avoid the blackouts.

A.H.: Although in your production you did attempt an organic blend between the scenes in having the actors sit by the side of the stage, humming and singing between scenes. They also provided sound effects and helped each other with scene changes.

W.Z.: Yes, I felt it was important to keep a steady flow throughout the scene changes in the play but also to constantly remind the audience that they were partaking in a theatrical event. The actors also announced their characters before each scene.

A.H.: In respect to the play's characters, no scene contains a minor character or a character on stage as a plot device. Was this a factor in your direction of the actors, or in what you tried to convey about these characters to the audience.

W.Z.: Definitely. No character is being served by anyone else on the stage. Every character has their own specific agenda, even a character who comes out and says one line. This increases the potential for conflict upon the stage. For instance, in the first scene (*The Weaver's Ecstasy*) because every member of that family has a different agenda, the scene becomes interestingly complex. This is a complexity the actors found, however, it's implicit in the script. It's not something we layered on. Overall, I'd say the conflict between Barker's 'strong' characters is what makes for an evocative experience for the audience in his plays - this is what we found.

A.H.: Certainly this nature of conflict coming as it does from an uncontextualized text demanded a lot of spontaneity on the part of the actors. Was there any particular method you used as a director to prepare the actors for this kind of experience on stage?

W.Z.: Well it really is all there in the text, ideally what you want is for the actors to forget everything but their

lines when they go out on stage. From my analysis, it seems that all of the characters have the same underlying objective, to survive. So the actors had to, first, define how they were going to survive and, second, they had to go out on stage and fight to attain this objective. Often the strategy an actor took in survival with their character was based on how other actors were pursuing their character's survival. So, a lot of our rehearsal time was spent getting the actors to use the language and listen to each other; to play <u>off</u> each other rather than playing <u>to</u> each other.

A.H.: So to attain this super-objective of survival, your actors found various tactics and strategies to achieve this end.

W.Z.: Yes, and these always involve the other characters in the play. The stakes are always high as these characters often find themselves in catastrophic situations, so they become desperate to get what they want from each other. Often these characters wont get what they want, and things are left up in the air. This is characteristic of Barker because he shows that there are no pat or easy solutions available to the conflicts in the play, and quite often they're left wondering what the hell went on.

My goal for this show was for the audience come up with questions, even if it wasn't until a week or two after they saw the show. To feel weird at the end of the show, to not know whether they liked it or disliked it, but to go away and think about it. From speaking to a number of people afterward I think the show was successful in this respect.

I think the show worked because it was so raw. The written text is very raw and we didn't strive to cook it. We didn't try to sand off the rough edges and make sense of it, we just tried to present it. It was put on, and it didn't mean anything unless you wanted to make it mean something. We didn't try to make it mean anything, so in this respect it was sort of like an empty sign, in semiological terms, and so it was up to the audience to find significance.

A.H.: What would you do differently if you were to do the show again? You've mentioned that you'd do away with blackouts between scenes -

W.Z.: Yes, I felt that the blackouts provided a comfort zone for the audience. It gives them time to relax between scenes, and I think it hurts the confrontational nature of the play. The scenes should be played so that the audience is challenged again and again, continuously.

A.H.: Does the play demonstrate a build in each scene's confrontation?

W.Z.: I think the only way you know that there's a build is at the end of the play, when you think about the piece as a whole and posit a hypothesis about how it holds together. But this is up to each audience member to figure out. The play doesn't advertise its structure, half way through you don't know where its going to end up. It's not like an Ibsen play, for instance, where half way through you know exactly where it's going to end up, so you just sit back and watch it unfold. His structure is a kind of 'post-structure', you start to notice things after you see it.

A.H.: I did get this feeling during your show in that I forgot where I was in the play, and I didn't know how many scenes were left, etc..

W.Z.: Yes, and yet if you'd walked out half way through the play it wouldn't make sense. You have to have the totality of the ten scenes before you know how it all works.

A.H.: In terms of stage space, the department 'thrust' the Thrust Stage space upon you, if you had your choice, what kind of theatre would you put the show in?

W.Z.: That's a tough question. I think I'd like to try it in either a proscenium-arch stage space, and get the divide of objectivity between audience and actor, or in a giant open space, like a room even bigger than the media room. In the latter, the play would take place all over the space, and thereby keep the audience actively looking about and in suspense as to what was next and where it would be performed - in their laps or across the space. The audience would have to constantly follow the movement of the play and continually experience it in a new way. This would captivate them to such an extent that they would only be able to think about their experience after the play was over. In the open space approach I'd also need a few more actors, so the scenes could be performed in rapid succession.

A.H.: How would this open space approach compare with Juha Malmivaara's idea of staging <u>Scenes From An Execution</u> in a mile-long warehouse where people had to physically follow the action along?

W.Z.: Well, I think it is very important for an audience to start off somewhere comfortable, and that the audience should be active intellectually but not physically. I think being active physically would get in the way of an audience being able to work intellectually. The audience should be physically passive. As soon as you start moving audience around there is

the risk of people talking with each other, talking about the experience while it is still happening, developing a larger social vision of the experience, not to mention, causing all kinds of interference for the actors, etc..

APPENDIX THREE

DIRECTOR'S NOTES ON PERFORMANCES OF THE LAST SUPPER

BY ANDREW HOUSTON

APRIL 1991, THE MEDIA ROOM, U. OF ALBERTA.

FRIDAY APRIL 19, 1991:

The show was good. There was a bit of off-balanced reaction from the actors to the overwhelming silence of the audience. The silence in the theatre is like an energy vacuum for the actors. None of them could remember a time when they have had to work harder to fill the theatre with energy. I think an analogy to this situation might be a person hitting a tennis ball against a wall, as compared to having it returned by someone else with a racket. In a more traditional theatre experience, the laughter and other reassurances coming from the audience are equivalent to a tennis partner returning a ball to you with added force and energy every time you hit to them. In this theatre, the actors must put more energy into the performance because many times throughout the play the audience is divided, confused, horrified, insulted, bored, etc., and these changes and divisions keep them so involved internally that they become a wall to the actors. Unlike a conventional theatre experience where the audience need not bother question their habitual responses and ways of making meaning, in this theatre they are obliged to do so and this takes their energy and focus away from the performers.

Another sports analogy which comes to mind when watching the actors work on stage is volleyball. Like many Barker plays, The Last Supper has a large cast, and the large number of performers on stage appear like a volleyball team volleying the energy to and fro. In performance, the play has an egalitarian feel as the team work required to keep the energy flowing is a must.

SATURDAY, APRIL 20, 1991:

Tonight's performance played before a full house - that is approximately 70 people. Like opening night there was still a lot of silence from the audience; however, there was a definitely higher energy level. They seemed to a tremendously intense focus from the audience which lasted the whole show.

The actors claimed they felt a strong energy coming

from the audience and this prompted them to work harder. The result was the best performance of the play I have ever seen.

I had several interesting discussions with people concerning the play in the Strathcona Hotel bar after the performance. Many people were still figuring the play out, and they felt inspired to do so. The play had raised some interesting questions for some, especially concerning Christianity. Some people wished I had contextualized the set more; they wanted it to appear more in the time of Christ, more Biblical, or more like the Russian revolution, etc.. One of the most helpful criticism was aimed at the lack of infatuation seen between the disciples and Lvov; in retrospect, I have decided I would work harder at creating this infatuation. At times it would really heighten the energy on stage.

SUNDAY, APRIL 21, 1991:

It is very interesting to watch the actors playing the roles of Ivory, Apollo, Arnold, Lvov, Anna, and Gisela continually trying new tactics toward objectives and challenging one another to respond. For me and them, new insights into the work keep arising. Watching this dynamic nature unfold from play text to performance text each night I am reminded of Barker's comment:

> The theatre is not a disseminator of truth but a provider of versions. Its statements are provisional. In a time when nothing is clear, the inflicting of clarity is a stale arrogance.[248]

At this point, the actors are allowing themselves to explore the many corridors of the play's meaning. Many of them enjoy each other and have fun exploring, and will continue to do so. Some are still apprehensive of the work, and are afraid to give up the painfully achieved foothold they have on their part. This play demands more from an actor than any other play any of them have ever been in before. Some rise to this challenge, some do not. The former are relaxed and have fun playing, the latter are restricted and scared and they feel the weight of the work with each line.

MONDAY, APRIL 22, 1991:

This is the smallest house to date, only 22 people

---

[248] Howard Barker, Arguments For A Theatre (London: Calder, 1989) 44.

showed up. All of the actors rose to this challenge except the actor playing Sloman. I think he has grown tired of the process; he looks tired. I felt sorry for the actor playing Lvov, he was literally chasing Sloman around the stage tonight, trying to 'light a fire under him' and get some reaction.

The actor playing Lvov works with a local theatre company. I found out tonight that they were at the Sunday show, and today they gave him some feedback at work. Apparently they enjoyed the production but they disliked the play. It sounds as if they were disappointed when the play did not follow a specific archetype more closely. For example, they wanted more Christ imagery. It seemed they weren't sure what the play was about, and weren't excited enough by what they saw to find the meaning themselves.

This is hard on the actor. I try to encourage him as best I can, saying that a lot of people want to be given a message and/or a moral in the theatre. Luckily this actor responded to our talk before the show; he was fighting as hard as he could on stage tonight. I think the principles behind Barker's aesthetic make for enough of an exciting challenge for actors that they are willing to risk in order to reach these principles and embody this aesthetic.

Barker's characters are difficult to portray without the utmost of conviction. His characters are unstable in conventional terms, they jump from objective to (sometimes contrary) objective. This scares a lot of actors and instead of exploring the depths of these character shifts, they can be seduced into acting generally. I have seen this tendency arise quite often in working on this play.

TUESDAY, APRIL 23, 1992:

The last night brings with it a great deal of fatigue, but also a tremendous sense of accomplishment shared by the whole company. Concerning fatigue, there were a lot of technical difficulties tonight, but the confidence and pride of the actors seemed to overcome the technical gaffs.

The audience is large, over 50, and very responsive and appreciative of the work. There are people in the audience who have been to the show before or, in the case of two people, twice before. I am amazed by their interest, and I promise you I don't know these people, they are obviously interested in the play. I think of a stanza from Barker's poem, *The Moon's Advice*,

Your [theatre]
Will wake
A single child in its mundane room[249]

The actors amaze me in how they are able to continually find new takes on lines - the possibilities must be endless. Also, I am amazed that at the closing night party most of the cast want to continue discussing new discoveries in the play. After two and a half months of pain and parable, they still 'lather in fascination'.

---

[249] Howard Barker, Lullabies for the Impatient (London: Calder, 1988) 41.